

PART I.



CHAPTER I.

'On the Home farm some watch the ploughman's furrow,
And talk of bullocks and the price of oats.'

'A QUARTER-PAST five,' said Elsie Ross, 'and no post yet.'

The letters at Rossie were usually brought in with the kettle at afternoon tea-time—the only post in the day, strange as it may seem to the southern reader.

'Not that I expect anything—but—here it is—and—yes! there is one for me. Not from Fräulein—from—I don't know whom.'

She opened the letter, which was rather long, and adorned with numerous dashes, flourishes, and points of exclamation; and read it thoughtfully.

'—— to leave your Scottish home, and find a resting-place under our roof, where, I need not say, you will receive a true WELCOME!'

'To leave my Scottish home!' said Elsie to herself. 'I won't,—and yet, perhaps——'

'Elsie, do you want to see the new bull?' said a gruff, an exceedingly gruff, voice in the passage.

'I do, papa,' said Elsie, jumping up and thrusting the letter into her pocket. 'Can't give my mind to it now, but *he'll* need to be consulted. I'll speak to him at dinner; at least, I will if he likes the bull.'

Rossie was a small old-fashioned house on the north-east coast of Scotland. Very lonely; for, except in the little fishing town of St. Ethernans the Rosses had no neighbours within ten miles. There was an old castle on a crag close by, and a fine rocky line of shore; a bad coast

for fishermen, and many a herring-boat had been lost upon those rocks in the fierce north-eastern gales.

Inland the country was well farmed, and looked thriving, if somewhat bleak. A fine line of hills bounded the view on the north and west.

The Rosses were an old family, though the property was small. It was strictly entailed on heirs-male, and for hundreds of years a Ross of Rossie had not been wanting to carry on the direct line of descent, so it was naturally a great disappointment to the present Laird that his only child should be a girl. Mrs. Ross had died when Elsie was only five; she was now seventeen, and Captain Robert Ross was still a widower.

Elsie had often been told that her father was likely to marry again; indeed she had many times been solemnly prepared for this event by her too far-seeing relatives, until, as she herself said, she was tired of the subject, and had ceased to expect anything to come of it. Yet now, at the beginning of our story, something is going to come of it; and to poor Elsie it is something of a blow.

Captain Ross was not by any means attractive, either in appearance or manners. His little daughter had often looked at the lovely picture of her mother which hung in the drawing-room, and wondered why she married him. It was a sweet sad face, and the child had inherited something of its wistful expression.

But the second wife Captain Ross had chosen, if indeed he could be said to have chosen her, was very different from the high-bred graceful lady in the picture.

'Preserve me, Robert! what can you see in yon woman?' exclaimed his Aunt Grizel, when he first announced his engagement to Miss Euphemia Webster.

'I don't see anything in her,' replied Robert briefly, 'but I must marry somebody. Why not a healthy young woman in the neighbourhood?'

'It is scarcely fair to Elsie,' said the old lady gravely.

But Robert walked away with a few inarticulate growls, probably to the effect that if Elsie chose to be a girl instead of a boy, she must take the consequences. Captain Ross's

thoughts, however, were at present much more occupied with his cattle than with his future bride; and the new bull's arrival was an all-important event in his eyes.

Elsie hastily caught up her old straw hat from the table, and with her little brown dachshund 'Hans,' pursued her parent, who, without waiting for her, had already nearly reached the farmyard.

'Where have they put him, papa?' said Elsie. 'Must we go through the byre? Hans! come here at once.'

The Laird eyed his daughter contemptuously as she carefully picked up the reluctant Hans. 'Put down that brute, can't you,' he growled, 'the cattle won't touch him.'

'Papa, he'd never come in, he hates the cattle—they *breathe* at him. He would only stay outside and lose me, and eat dead rats and things.

'A useless fool!' said the Laird, as he unwound the last twist of tarred string which fastened the byre door—'I'll have it destroyed.'

Elsie, quite unmoved by this threat, followed her father as he strode past the long line of fat cattle to the bull's enclosure, which was fenced off by a wooden rail. Here they found the griever and the cattle-man standing in easy attitudes contemplating the new arrival. The cattle-man moved a little to one side and touched his cap in silence; Sandy, the griever, who was a privileged person, fond of long words and long harangues, merely waved his hand bull-wards, and addressed his master—'A graand baste yon, Captain! Just rin your eye ower him. There's a semmetry! He's a pairfect picter—far afore the Drum-sheugh bull!'

The Laird made no reply in words, but with a stolid air he prodded the big shorthorn hard with his stick, leaving a round patch of red mud on its glossy skin. His countenance was carefully divested of all expression whatever; a sure sign to Elsie that her father was more than satisfied. This was, she knew, his way of showing the most lively delight; when displeased, his face had no lack of expression, but he never smiled, and seldom laughed except

in the bitterest irony. The Laird was not blessed with the sweetest of tempers, yet he was really, in the main, a kind-hearted man. He would never do a cruel thing to man or beast, though he would utter the most blood-curdling threats on the smallest provocation.

He was a middle-sized man, verging on fifty; heavily built, though not stout; rugged featured and fresh-coloured. He wore an excessively old brown coat and hat; his corduroy trousers were tied below the knee; his legs encased in marvellously strong gaiters, well splashed with mud.

Elsie stood by his side, her pretty hands resting on the paling: she had deposited her dog in an empty cattletrough, out of harm's way. She scarcely looked as if she could be that rough man's daughter—a tall, very slender figure, with a soft pale face and large blue-gray eyes. Her thick hair was wound in heavy plaits round her little head; fair shining hair, which yet looked almost dark against the pure paleness of her skin. Elsie's dress was far from being of a fashionable or expensive kind; yet in her short blue serge gown and yellow petticoat she might have stepped straight out of some old picture.

'He is a beautiful bull, papa, and he does not look as if he would ever become fierce.'

The bull's perfect good humour under the repeated and severe prods of the Laird prompted this last remark from Elsie; and, the examination being satisfactorily concluded, the party prepared to leave the byre.

The dinner at Rossie that evening was an unusually cheerful meal; the Laird was in his best mood, and Hans was permitted to be of the party. Elsie never brought him into the dining-room if her father was at all out of humour; he would not hurt him, she knew, but she did not like to hear her dog reviled, and his life threatened, by her irascible parent. Hans, who had no proper pride, and who was exceedingly sagacious where food was concerned, sat close to the Laird, gazing at him admiringly, and with glistening eyes, waiting patiently for the cheese-rind which the master of the house seldom failed to bestow on him.

Elsie's thoughts were intent upon the letter she had re-

ceived that afternoon; and she was about to introduce the subject when a sudden question from her father made her start.

'Is this Lent?' he demanded.

'No, papa, Lent is over. This is Easter week.'

'*That's* a good thing!' said the Laird.

Elsie wondered what had produced this sudden interest in Church matters.

'He never goes to Church,' thought she, 'and I do not see that he mortifies the flesh; I am sorry Lent is over if he wishes to do so.'

'Why, papa?' she asked, rather timidly.

'Affects the cattle-markets,' was the reply. 'You might have known that.'

'Papa, I have had a letter from my Aunt Caroline—Mrs. Lindsay, you know, in England.'

'What does she want?' said the Laird, helping himself to fish.

'She asks me to go and stay at Chippingham—to pay them a long visit.'

Captain Ross laid down his fork and looked at his daughter.

'Do you want to go?' he asked.

'I think,' said Elsie, lifting her eyes courageously to his, 'I should like to go away for a while—just now.'

'I don't see that you could do better,' said her father, after a short pause. This reply was unexpected; and in spite of Elsie's desire to go away, and thus avoid living with her future stepmother, it gave her a sudden pang.

'Does he wish to get rid of me?' she thought. But the Laird's next remark, though only muttered as if to himself, reassured her.

'Wouldn't agree, of course—can't expect—better out of that.'

'Of course I would come back,' said Elsie a little appealingly. Here Bella, the 'tablemaid,' entered with a dish, and there was a short silence.

'Papa, what sort of a person is Aunt Caroline?' asked Elsie when they were alone again.

'I don't suppose there's any harm in the woman,' returned the Laird. 'Mad, you know—quite mad. She's got some sort of a religious craze.'

'And my uncle? Is he religious too?'

'How should I know? He didn't use to be, but I daresay she has given it him by this time.'

He spoke as though religion were a mental disease of an infectious nature, but Elsie knew his manner, and the supposed insanity of her relations caused her no anxiety.

'When do you want to go?' he asked presently.

'Aunt Caroline wishes me to come as soon as may be convenient. You have never told me,' she added, with an effort to speak unconcernedly, 'what day you are to be married.'

'End of next week,' said the Laird, rising. 'You had better start on Tuesday or Wednesday. Go and see the old lady to-morrow, and make arrangements.'

'Aunt Grizel?' said Elsie. 'Very well, papa;' and the conversation ended.

CHAPTER II.

‘ The day is over,
The feverish careful day ;
Can I recover
Strength that has ebbd away ?
Can even sleep such freshness give
That I again should wish to live ? ’

ELSIE had gone to bed that night with a troubled mind. Until now she had had no idea of leaving her home, and although she knew her father’s marriage must take place, she could generally manage to put the thought of it away from her. Now, however, that which had seemed to be in the dim future was close at hand ; she must think and act for herself ; and she felt as if life were one great battle, and she had no strength to face it.

The night was wet and stormy, and the dismal sound of the wind and rain against her window, and the dull roar of the sea, served to depress her still more. She soon fell asleep, however, and slept soundly ; the storm passed away through the night, and when she awoke, refreshed, in the cheery April sunshine, half her cares had vanished.

‘ I have a great deal before me,’ she thought ; ‘ the house *must* be left all in order. I shall have to see about it all. It would never do to have anything untidy when Euphemia comes. Then there’s Aunt Grizel this afternoon, and—I ought to go and call on Euphemia. It is my duty, and I’ll do it ! ’ she added heroically, brushing her hair with extra vigour. ‘ It is due to her to let her know I am going away. Poor soul ! I dare say she will be thankful.’

The sound of a bell interrupted these reflections.

'Prayers!' exclaimed Elsie in dismay; 'I shall be late. That comes of good resolutions when one is dressing!' She finished with all speed, and hurried to the dining-room, at the door of which the servants were already waiting.

Since the departure of her governess, six months before, Elsie had made it a rule to read prayers to the household every morning. Her mother, she was told, had been accustomed to do so; and Elsie thought it was her duty, though it caused her no little anxiety and dread. She was far too shy to let her father even know that such was her custom; so, as the Laird did not like to be kept waiting for his breakfast even for a moment, she would beg him not to come in till after 'the second bell,' thereby artfully leading him to suppose that the first bell meant nothing, and was but an empty form.

Elsie chose a short Psalm that morning, then read the prayer for the day from an old-fashioned book of family prayers which she had hunted out of the garret.

Scarcely had she reached the second paragraph when a heavy footstep was heard in the passage. Elsie skilfully omitted a long petition for the conversion of the Jews, arrived rather abruptly at Amen, and rose, just as the sound of the approaching footsteps stopped outside the door. She looked round—the servants were still on their knees; they were waiting for the concluding prayer. She seized the book once more, and shut it with a loud clap—in vain! they would not take a hint; the three backs remained immovable in their devout posture. Elsie would not hurry over the Lord's Prayer; it would not be right she felt, so she repeated it slowly and reverently, though with a beating heart, and lo! as by a miracle, the creaking footsteps turned away from the door; it never opened, and the Laird went off in another direction. Nor did he appear until Elsie had in some measure recovered herself; she had even finished her plate of porridge, and put aside the portion destined for Hans, to be kept till his own proper dinner hour. She could not help, however, feeling an uneasy dread that the Laird had been listening at the

door (which indeed was the case); she suffered all the pangs of a guilty conscience; yet, when he did come in, he made no remark on the subject, and did not seem any gruffer than usual.

'When are you going to see your aunt to-day?' he inquired during breakfast. 'I'll order the pony for you.'

Miss Griselda Ross was the Laird's aunt as well as Elsie's, but he never made use of the pronouns we, our, us; it would be beneath him, as it were, to speak in the first person plural, and thus place himself on a level with the inferior beings he addressed.

Elsie said she would go in the afternoon. Her mornings were usually spent in household cares, and to-day she was particularly anxious to get everything into proper order before her step-mother's arrival.

The household at Rossie consisted of three women-servants—Marjorie, the cook, a sort of fixture in the family, who had been there since Elsie was a baby; Janet, who attended upon her, and was also the housemaid—a good-natured, rather stupid girl; and Bella, the tablemaid. The last was a good-looking young woman with a temper; she belonged to that class of persons who never make a mistake, in their own estimation at least, and cannot bear the slightest word or even hint of disapproval. She was a clever girl, and did her work well; but this characteristic rendered her decidedly trying, and she and her mistress had occasional disputes.

'Bella,' said Elsie that morning, appearing suddenly in the pantry after breakfast, 'I noticed last night at dinner that there are holes in the cheese napkin. You must really fasten it lower down—the Captain is so apt to cut it in taking off the rind for Hans.'

Bella surveyed the cheese—a tall Stilton, bound round with a napkin. The holes were undeniable.

'It'll be the mice that have done it,' said she.

'The mice?' said Elsie; 'nonsense, Bella! it is cut with a knife. Look at it yourself.'

Bella gloomily regarded it.

'It was just the mice,' she repeated.

'It was not the mice,' said Elsie warmly; 'would the mice eat the napkin and leave the cheese? I just ask you that, Bella!'

'It was nothing but the mice,' said Bella doggedly.

'And I say it was *not* the mice,' cried Elsie. 'Do not let me hear you say it was the mice again.'

Bella took up the cheese, examined it all round, and set it down again.

'The mice,' said she.

'Bella,' said Elsie, who felt now that her dignity was at stake, 'I forbid you to say the mice. I forbid you to use that word. If you say mice again, I shall be obliged to part with you. Mend that napkin and put it on lower down.'

With these words Elsie walked majestically away, not venturing to turn round again, although she fancied she still heard 'mice' murmured faintly behind her.

Her next visit was to the kitchen, which was one of the most cheerful rooms in the house, so clean and fresh and bright was it; for Marjorie prided herself on never letting a speck of dust remain anywhere; and her brass pans shone like gold, ranged along the warm-coloured buff walls. The stone floor was freshly strewn with sand; and Marjorie herself looked the picture of neatness in her white apron and 'mutch' and little tartan shawl.

Marjorie was a calm woman—a great comfort in that household. A little too apt, perhaps, to look at the dark side of things; but Elsie placed great reliance on her judgment in all household matters. Things might be better than Marjorie represented them, but never could be worse: with this view she was wont to console herself if anything went wrong.

'I thoct upon the hen for your denner the day,' said Marjorie, taking up a fat fowl from the dresser. 'Ye like a hen whiles, and the Captain, he'll be content wi't. I'm thinkin' we'll need a sheep killed gin next week.'

'Next week—yes,' said Elsie, sitting down on the edge of the table. 'Marjorie—the Captain's marriage is to be the end of next week, and I am going away before that—away to England.'

'Keep me!' exclaimed Marjorie, as she laid down the hen and looked at her young mistress with concern. 'And will ye be lang awa', Miss Elsie?'

'I do not know; I may be,' answered Elsie rather sadly. 'I am going to stay with my granduncle, General Lindsay. Do you remember him and Mrs. Lindsay? were they not once here?'

'Ay, I mind them fine. Ye were a wee bairn then, Miss Elsie.'

'What were they like, Marjorie?'

'The General was a weel-fa'ard gentleman; the leddy, she took ill wi' the weet roads—there had been an awfu' heap o' rain. She had a maid—Parkins they ca'ed her—sic daft-like names thae English have. Eh! the fykes o' that woman! The leddy was a wee thing parteeklar hersel', but Parkins——!'

Here Marjorie paused, words failing to express what she had suffered from the peculiar fancies of the English lady's-maid.

'Aweel,' she resumed after a few minutes' silence, 'I'll be vexed when ye gang, Miss Elsie; it'll be an unco change to me. But maybe ye'll be happier awa', and the Captain, he'll no be needin' ye sac sair.'

'She, too, thinks I had better go,' thought Elsie. But aloud she only added, 'And you know, Marjorie, I want to have everything in order before—Mrs. Ross—comes; that will be next week. I was speaking to Bella just now—really she is provoking. She says there are mice, which eat the napkins.'

'Esie-bell?' said Marjorie with a sort of sniff (they did not get on together); 'I was thinkin' maybeye had discorded,' she added soothingly. 'Hoot! never heed Esie-bell. She's that dour—Mice? there's nae mice. Make us thankful if there's nae rottens.'

'Oh, I hope not!' said Elsie anxiously. 'It would be dreadful if rats got into the house. Do you think they will, Marjorie?'

'I doubt they'll win in, through time,' replied Marjorie with resignation. 'The new hen-house is just useless wi'

them—a perfect riddle o' holes, the floor o't. Would ye please to look at it, Miss Elsie?’

Elsie thought this report so serious that she started at once to investigate, taking her little dog with her.

It may be necessary to give the reader a short sketch of Hans, who has been so often mentioned, and on whom Elsie lavished so much affection. She had long wished to possess a dachshund, and her governess, Fräulein Meyer, had good-naturedly brought one straight from Germany for her, about a year before.

Elsie was charmed with the little soft brown puppy, and bestowed on him the name of ‘the discreet Hans,’ after the sagacious hero of Grimm’s tale. But Hans did not turn out quite the pure-bred badger-hound that her fancy had pictured. He did not, indeed, grow big, and he had a beautiful little head, with large intelligent brown eyes; but his curiously misshapen body and enormous tail, which, in moments of excitement, swelled out like that of an enraged cat, gave him a most comical appearance. Hans was not a brave animal, though he was fond of sport in a small way. He was afraid of men, cattle, horses, dogs, cats, and poultry; and Elsie, who was a prey to constant anxiety on his account, used to spend much time and thought in shielding him from the dangers to which he believed himself exposed; as well as in preventing him from injuring his health by over-eating. He was, however, devotedly attached to his little mistress, and would sit gazing at her for hours, keeping his large tail outstretched ready to wag at the slightest glance or sign.

Let it not be supposed that Elsie took him to the hen-house to kill the rats; nothing could have been further from the thoughts of either of them; but she seldom went anywhere without him, except when she rode or drove, as then his short legs could not carry him far with any speed.

Elsie and Hans had not far to go, as a small strip of shrubbery was all that separated the farmyard from the house; but Elsie chose a somewhat circuitous route to the hen-house, threading her way cautiously amongst the stacks, and looking out for her secret foe, the gander. This valiant

bird, whose two wives were at present sitting on eggs, was ready to fly at all comers, and nourished a particular enmity against Hans, whom he conceived to have malicious designs upon his family. Elsie did not care to risk an open encounter with him, so she would dodge him round the stacks 'on Hans's account,' she always told herself when she did so; though what she would have done if Hans had not been there may be questioned.

To-day she passed the stacks in safety, and had almost reached the hen-house door, when the well-known pattering sound behind her made her turn round in alarm. The gander had found his enemy, intent upon a haddock's head, and promptly bore down upon him with outstretched neck and flapping wings. In a moment Elsie had snatched up Hans (who, with great presence of mind, kept hold of the fish's head), and fled ignominiously, never stopping till she had put the whole stackyard between her and her pursuer.

'Hans, do you *wish* to be destroyed?' said she breathlessly, as she put him down. 'For the gander will do it some day, even if the master does not.'

A visit to the hen-house was now out of the question. 'Why should we expose ourselves again to his fury?' Elsie said. 'I'll wait till one o'clock, when he has his dinner. Come, Hans, we will go into the garden.'

The garden lay to the back of the house, at the side farthest from the sea, and was surrounded by a wall of red sandstone. The house itself was of this material, as were most of the buildings in that district. It was small, square, and very narrow for its height; at each corner was a little round turret like a pigeon-house. It looked bare and gaunt enough, yet not unpicturesque when viewed from the sea, from which it was only separated by some broken ground thinly planted with shrubs, shrivelled and browned by the east wind. The walls of the house were very thick, and within the rooms were small and rather bare of furniture. The drawing-room was wainscoted and painted white: it looked, as did all the best rooms in the house, to the north, for the sake of the really beautiful view of the little bay and the hills beyond.

Over the mantelpiece hung the portrait of Elsie's mother, which has been already mentioned ; the only picture in the room, except a few black silhouettes of old gentlemen with pigtails. The walls of the dining-room, however, were well covered with Ross ancestors ; and over nearly every door in the house a stag's head and horns was fastened. The little entrance hall likewise bristled with these trophies ; which were used as pegs on which to hang hats, caps, and great-coats in various stages of dilapidation. In one corner stood the Laird's stick and spud, in another Elsie kept her gardening tools.

It was here, after an hour's lingering in the garden, that Elsie stopped short, struck by the sight of a strange hat and umbrella, and, a minute later, Bella met her in the passage. 'Please, ma'am, Mr. Macrae is here, and the Captain has ordered luncheon at one o'clock,' said she primly.

'Tiresome man !' thought Elsie ; 'but, at any rate, I cannot go to the hen-house this day.' She went to the drawing-room to put the bunch of pale late-flowering daffodils she had gathered in water, and when the luncheon-bell rang, was joined by her father and Mr. Macrae, the family lawyer.

Elsie had known the latter from her childhood, and looked upon him as a sort of necessary evil. He had a red face, reddish whiskers, a loud cheerful voice, and an excellent opinion of himself ; he was nevertheless a capital man of business, and very useful to the Laird, by whom he was much esteemed.

'How do you do, Mr. Macrae ?' Elsie said, giving him her hand, not without a certain little air of condescension. 'I hope Mrs. Macrae is well.'

'She's well, I thank you, Miss Ross,' returned Mr. Macrae. 'I hope I see you well. I hear you are about to leave us—to wing your flight, as one may say, southwards. Yes ! yes ! England's a fine country.'

'I am sure it is,' said Elsie, ignoring the first part of this speech. 'And much warmer, I suppose, than here, though this is not a backward season.'

'The vegetation,' said Mr. Macrae, 'is indeed pretty well advanced. The grass parks are commencing to as-shoom an appearance of verdure. Your fields, Captain, I see, are all sown, with the exception of the turnips. Lord Ochil was mentioning to me, last time I saw him, that his carrot crop had not been such a failure last year.'

'No one but a fool would have tried to grow carrots on a clay soil,' growled the Laird. 'I saw them—eaten by worms and insects and all sorts of devils. I wouldn't have given his carrots to one of my pigs.'

Mr. Macrae turned again to Elsie after this slight rebuff, adapting his conversation to her feminine mind; for he prided himself especially upon his politeness to ladies, his elegant language, and correct pronunciation.

'The burds are at present very melodious,' he observed, as a blackbird's fluty note came in through the open window. 'I believe, Miss Ross, you are partial to these little warblers.'

'Yes,' replied Elsie, 'and the thrushes were singing beautifully this morning. They are not so scarce as they used to be.'

'I am not precisely aware,' said Mr. Macrae, 'what note the thrush emits. In England, I am told, the night-ingales render the woods vocal.'

'Will you take some cheese?' said the Laird, impatiently.

'I thank you, Captain—I will trouble Miss Ross for a little more of her shooperior pudding.'

Elsie thought that luncheon would never come to an end, but at length the Laird dismissed her to prepare for her ride, and not keep the pony waiting. She was soon ready, but before starting she committed Hans, with much solemnity, to the care of Janet, admonishing her to keep her eye constantly upon him. 'Be sure he doesn't eat the hen's meat, and, above all, keep him from the pigs' pail!' were her parting words. 'Bella has more sense than Janet,' she reflected as she ran downstairs. 'He might have been safer with her; but after the mice, I don't choose to ask a favour of Bella to-day.'

The Laird and Mr. Macrae were standing at the door, where Elsie's handsome brown pony was already waiting, held by Jamie, the stable-boy.

'Allow me to assist you, Miss Ross,' said Mr. Macrae, coming forward. 'Your horse appears a little restive.'

The pony, indeed, was pawing the ground wildly, as he had a trick of doing when first brought out. Mr. Macrae kept well out of the way of his heels, but Elsie was on in a moment, and after a few plunges he started quietly enough.

'Miss Ross is a fine equestrian, I perceive,' were the last words she heard as she rode off.

CHAPTER III.

'This night is my departing night,
For here nae langer must I stay;
There's neither friend nor foe of mine
But wishes me away.'

ELSIE thoroughly enjoyed her ride that afternoon. She rode slowly, for it was such a sweet spring day, and she wanted to think and look about her. She had always had a feeling for natural beauty, but never till now, when she was about to leave it, had the scenery around her seemed so lovely. She trotted gently first over a bare stretch of road, then, as it entered a small wood, she pulled up to a walk.

A slight breeze was blowing off the sea; it made a soft hushed sound amongst the fir-trees, which mingled pleasantly with the cooing of the wood-pigeons. A month later the wood would be green with tall ferns, but the fronds had scarcely yet begun to uncurl their brown balls, and the withered leaves about their roots gave the ground a russet shade.

The sun lit up the red stems of the Scotch firs, and flickered here and there in spots upon the mossy stones and patches of brown heather. At the farther edge of the wood there was a strip of young plantation, and beyond that again a sort of open moor, dotted with 'whins' and broom-bushes. The small birds were busy in the young spruce firs; Elsie could distinguish their different notes—the chaffinch's loud cheery song, the softer call-note of the green 'lintie,' the plaintive chant of the yellow-hammer. Out upon the moor she heard the sound she loved to listen

to—the wild spring cry of the curlew, beginning slowly with long notes, then growing louder and quicker, and dying away in widening circles of sound.

Beyond the moor the character of the soil changed ; it had a colder look, and the ploughed fields were almost gray where the sun had dried the surface, quite different from the 'red land' about Rossie. The road wound uphill, and at the top Elsie stood still to look. Below her, in the hollow, lay the little gray town of St. Ethernans, the massive old church, with its square tower and short steeple, rising up in the midst. The sea beyond was of a deep bright blue, and only a line of white surf told of the last night's storm. The day was clear, and she could plainly see the lighthouse on the other side of the bay, and the patches of snow still shining on the far-off hills.

'Why do I go away?' thought Elsie. 'Yet I must, no one seems to want me here. Shall I ever come back and look at those hills again? I will say good-bye to them now, I do not feel as if I ever should.'

The tears rushed to her eyes and blinded her ; she sat still without troubling to wipe them away, until the sound of wheels made her start.

'How stupid I am,' she thought ; 'it will never do to be found crying on the public road.'

The pony pricked up his ears at the sound of the advancing gig ; he rather liked standing still, unless desired to do so for any special purpose, but he could not endure wheels behind him, so Elsie started off at a brisk trot. She did not pursue the road to St. Ethernans, but turned down the first opening to the right, a cart track leading to the farm of Nether Bogie, which was rented by Mr. John Webster, brother to Euphemia, the Laird's destined bride.

The farmsteading was rather a large one, situated like an island amidst an ocean of ploughed fields ; without a tree, except one solitary, wind-blown ash. It boasted a tall chimney, however, and there were still a good many stacks. Close to the front door was a row of hen-coops, each containing a brood of newly-hatched turkeys ; for

Miss Euphemia was a noted hen-wife, and her turkeys were always the earliest in the country. Elsie dismounted, and looked at the little black and gray chicks with interest; then rang the front-door bell. It was presently answered by a tall, red-haired, awkward-looking girl, who blushed and grinned shyly as she recognised her visitor.

'How are you, Agnes?' said Elsie. 'Is Euphemia in?'

'Yes; just come in, please,' replied Agnes.

'The pony——?'

'I'll take him round.'

Elsie went into the dining-room, where the family usually sat; the windows were closely shut, and a peculiar pungent odour, as of boiled cabbage, pervaded it. The furniture was black horse-hair; in the middle of the room was a large round table, covered with a green cloth; on it stood a cut-glass water decanter, with a tumbler reversed over it. Around this central ornament a few books and a photograph album were arranged; underneath it was a woollen mat with a yellow and crimson border. On the mantelpiece, which was painted green to represent malachite, were some large foreign shells, and two or three clay pipes were scattered about. In a big chair by the fire an old woman was dozing, wrapped up in shawls; she did not look up or speak, and Elsie trod softly for fear of disturbing her.

Agnes entered in a few minutes, followed by Euphemia. The latter was older by some years than her sister; less awkward, and without the red hair. She had what might be called a comely face, and looked the essence of good temper, but her incessant simper was to Elsie almost more irritating than Agnes's open-mouthed stare.

'I hope you've not had to wait, Miss Ross,' said Euphemia as she came forward. 'I'm sure I take it very kind—such a long ride as you've had.'

'I wanted to come and see you, Euphemia,' Elsie replied. 'I suppose it will be the last time before you come to Rossie; but I shall be away when you come, for I am going to England.'

'Dear me!' exclaimed Euphemia, 'such a long way! and all by yourself, Miss Ross!'

'You ought not to call me Miss Ross now, Euphemia.'

Elsie felt a little shy, which had the effect of making her manner very stately. Euphemia simpered and looked down.

'I'm sure,' said she, 'you're very condescending.'

'How is Mrs. Blair?' asked Elsie, violently changing the subject.

'Oh, pretty well to-day. Agnes, turn Granny's chair. Granny, here's Miss Ross asking for you.'

Agnes went behind the wheeled chair and launched her grandmother at Elsie, who retreated, feeling sorry she had introduced the subject.

'Are you keeping better, Mrs. Blair?' she said, taking one of the limp old hands. But the poor old woman only grunted feebly, and was soon replaced in her corner by Agnes.

Elsie then proceeded to explain to the sisters about her proposed departure; she could discern through all Euphemia's sighs and expressions of regret that her absence would be a relief to her, while Agnes gazed at her in silent wonder. She rose at last to go, declining all offers of refreshment on the plea that she was going to have tea with Aunt Grizel.

'But a bit of cake! you'll not refuse a bit of cake—and a glass of ginger wine!'

Agnes hurried off, and returned with the cake-basket—a startling piece of plate, on which were displayed alternate squares of shortbread and slices of pound-cake. Elsie said she never drank wine, but, not to seem ungracious, she took a bit of the shortbread, and was sitting down again patiently, when old Mrs. Blair woke up and began to glare with frightened eyes round the room.

'Wha's that?' she exclaimed, suddenly fixing them on Elsie. 'The Lord preserve us! wha's that?'

'It's Miss Ross that has called, Granny,' said Euphemia. 'Surely you know Miss Ross.'

The old lady seemed pacified for the moment, but the

alarm in her eyes revived as she turned them on Agnes. 'And that?' she said, pointing to the latter with a shaking hand, 'wha's that?'

'Dear, dear me, Grannie!' said Euphemia, with meek reproach. 'You're very dazed like to-day! D'ye not know our Agnes?'

'She's like a haddock,' observed Mrs. Blair, sinking back. 'She's very like a haddock.'

'Dear, dear, dear!' sighed Euphemia again. 'I hope you'll excuse her, Miss Ross. She's very stupid-like to-day.'

Elsie was making heroic efforts to be grave and sympathetic. Agnes's expression at the moment was, she thought, exactly that of a haddock, and could not have been more happily described.

'Poor Mrs. Blair!' she said. 'I am sorry she is not so well. Good-bye, Euphemia, good-bye, Agnes.' She shook hands with each of them, and went up to the old lady.

'Ye're a bonny crater,' said Mrs. Blair with unexpected intelligence. 'I wish ye weel.'

Elsie felt thankful when she was once more on horse-back, and in the fresh air. She set off at a quick pace, and soon reached St. Ethernans. Her aunt's house stood a little apart, at the end of the long straggling street; it had a small plot of ground in front, planted with thorn and laburnum bushes, and a good-sized 'back-green' behind. Elsie left her pony at the inn a little farther on, and walked into the house unannounced; her aunt had seen her pass and was expecting her. She received Elsie affectionately, and the girl found it a relief to pour out the history of the last days' doings.

Miss Griselda Ross was a lady of considerable dignity of manner; tall and thin, and wonderfully erect, in spite of her seventy-eight years of age. Her features were strongly marked, her blue eyes still keen and bright. The fashion of her dress never varied, a black gown and large silk apron, a band of black velvet across her forehead, and a white cap with lavender ribbons tied under her chin.

The little parlour was very formal and plain, but clean,

fresh, and airy. To Elsie it was as familiar and home-like as the drawing-room at Rossie; she regularly spent her Sundays there, and would come as often as she could to see her aunt Grisel on weekdays also. The stiff little room had looked exactly the same as long as she could remember, only in summer the moreen window-curtains gave place to muslin ones, which were put up punctually at the 'May term,' and taken down again at Martinmas. There was a bookcase, in one shelf of which Elsie was allowed to keep her Sunday books, and a corner cupboard contained some old china, and other curiosities and relics, dear to the old lady's heart.

Elsie had sat down in her accustomed position on the rug, and had thrown her hat, gloves, and riding-whip on a chair, a piece of untidiness which for once passed unproved.

Miss Grisel heard of her approaching departure without surprise, indeed with evident approbation.

'Well, my dear,' said she, 'it is right that you should learn to know your own people. I was telling Robert—your father—last time he was here, that you need a change, and there cannot be a better time than now.'

'Papa said that I would be better away,' said Elsie, and her lip quivered a little. 'Aunt Grisel, do you know I have got a feeling—a presentiment, that if I go to England I shall never come back—I shall never see Rossie again.'

She knelt on the rug as she said this, her clasped hands resting on her aunt's knee; the old lady looked at her uneasily. Miss Grisel was a firm believer in presentiments, dreams, omens, and superstitions of all kinds, but she was not a person who would encourage a child in foolish fancies.

'Hoots, my dear!' she said almost roughly, 'don't take morbid fancies into your head. I never heard such nonsense in my life. You're just tired—you're as white as a cloot. Tuts! what's come over Elizabeth with the tea?' She rose stiffly and went to the door.

'Eleezabeth! come away, Eleezabeth! haste ye with the tea! Miss Elsie's tired.'

'Why did I speak like that?' thought Elsie remorsefully.

‘I ought not—Aunt Grizel is old, it does not do to put her out.’ And a great longing came over the girl for some one she might speak to, who was not old like Miss Grizel, nor gruff like her father, nor doleful like Marjorie, some one she might talk to without fear of being reprovèd or misunderstood.

‘Aunt Grizel, never mind the tea,’ she said, rising and taking the old lady’s hand. ‘I am just a little tired, as you say. Sit down, and I will read you Aunt Caroline’s letter.’ The letter Elsie read was as follows:—

‘It is with mingled feelings, my dear young niece, that I take up my pen to write to you. It is, indeed, impossible that *you* should remember *me*, but I can never forget seeing you, then a darling baby in your dear mother’s arms, on the occasion of my *first* and *only* visit to the country of your birth! I have heard but lately that your father is about to form new ties, and, as he will no longer *exclusively* need your administering love, your dear uncle and I now *feel* that the time has come when we may induce you to leave your Scottish home, and find a resting-place under our roof, where, I need not say, you will receive a true WELCOME! Your father, to whom your dear uncle and I beg to offer our kind remembrances, will not, I trust, disapprove of our proposal, as he formerly gave us hopes of *claiming* you at some future time; and we shall, dear Elspeth, anticipate your arrival, *as soon* as he may deem it convenient.

‘It is our earnest wish that your sojourn with us may be both pleasant and profitable; and my hope and prayer, dear child, is, that our intercourse may be *fraught* with blessings of the highest kind.—I am, my dear niece, ever your affectionate aunt and godmother,

‘CAROLINE B. LINDSAY.’

Elsie read this letter through without comment, giving the proper expression as well as she could, and then looked up to try and read her Aunt Grizel’s face; but the old lady was busied with the tea-things, and, outwardly at least, paid no attention.

'Here, child ! bring in a chair to the table, and put in the cream yourself. What sort of tea-bread has she brought? Help yourself to a scone, or see ! there are cookies.'

Elsie helped herself to a scone. Aunt Grizel's tea was strong and good, and under its influence her spirits rose visibly, and she dismissed the gloomy presentiments from her mind.

'Do tell me about Aunt Caroline,' she said. 'You must know her, Aunt Grizel, she must be quite unlike anyone I ever saw.'

'I haven't seen them since they came to Rossie that time she speaks of; I used to know your granduncle, the General, very well long ago. He had a great work with your mother—she was his favourite niece, he used to say.'

'Tell me about him then, Aunt Grizel.'

'There's not much to tell about him. He was thought very handsome in his youth; and he was always a kind good creature. He didn't marry till he was quite a middle-aged man. As to your Aunt Caroline, she's a lively, agreeable woman. To be sure she had always her fancies and her trennies, but she's a good wife to him.'

'Papa says she has got a religious craze, but he always says that of any one who is at all pious.'

'Your Aunt Caroline is a good woman, my dear,' said Miss Grizel shortly. 'Always bear that in mind. She has a great deal of manner, and she is one of your Frenchified kind of women; but I never fell out with her for my part. I just let her say her say.'

'I wonder if I should fall out with Euphemia, if I lived with her,' said Elsie. 'Papa seemed to think I might. He said he couldn't expect us to agree. Oh, Aunt Grizel ! what could have made him want to marry her?'

'Your father was too long of marrying, my dear,' said Aunt Grizel oracularly. 'He put off and put off; and when men do that, Elsie, either they end by never marrying at all, or they just think that anybody will do. We may be thankful it's a good girl like Euphemia Webster that he's taken.'

'But she's so stupid; Aunt Grizel! She is sure to provoke him in time.'

'Euphemia is not stupid, my dear,' said Aunt Grizel reprovingly. 'She's the best housewife in the country; she makes excellent jelly; she always has the first chickens and the best turkeys; and look at her butter!—it's beautiful! And then such a good sister as she is to her brother and Agnes, and so kind and dutiful to her poor old grandmother. She's a very superior girl, Elsie; it's only very much to be lamented that she's not in a higher rank of life, and that she comes of a Radical family—and, worse than all, she's Free Kirk. That comes of putting off!'

'Is it worse to be Free Kirk than not to be a lady?' asked Elsie doubtfully.

'Hoots!' said Aunt Grizel. 'Ring the bell, Elsie, if you're done.'

The subject of Euphemia being thus dismissed, the conversation turned upon Elsie's journey and the necessary arrangements. It was settled that it would be best for her to break her journey in Edinburgh, and to stay a couple of days there with old friends of her mother's, a Mrs. and Miss Ferguson. An hour soon passed; and, after promising to spend Sunday with her aunt as usual, Elsie set off home.

CHAPTER IV.

‘Then up bespak his brother John,
Says, “Ye’ve done us meikle wrang, O ;
Ye’ve married ane far below our degree,
A mock to a’ our kin, O.”’

MISS GRIZEL could not settle down either to her stocking-knitting that evening, or to her reading of good books. She got out of her arm-chair, and paced up and down the room ; she undid the shutter, and looked out into the quiet street, then came back to her chair, put on her spectacles again and tried to read, but presently took them off, and laid them on the table beside her, with a sigh.

‘I doubt if I’ve altogether done my duty by that child,’ she said to herself. ‘I should maybe have stayed on at Rossie ; but who would have thought Robert would be so long of marrying ? And it was hard to bear, there’s no doubt of that. To go and engage thon foreign woman for Elsie, and never tell me ! But I fear that’s pride. She’s grown up a fine creature, but it’s not through the guiding of me, Grizel Ross. Lord forgive me !’

It may be doubted whether the old lady had quite just cause for all this self-reproach. Her position had been rather a difficult one. She had left her little house in St. Ethernans to nurse Elsie’s mother through her last illness ; and after her death Miss Grizel remained on at Rossie, keeping house for her nephew, as she had done before his marriage.

Captain Ross seemed to take this as a matter of course ; and as time went on, his aunt felt it necessary to come to some understanding with him.

'Robert,' said she one day, 'I have been thinking that I have perhaps stopped long enough with you.'

'I thought you were living here,' replied Robert. 'Better sell your house in St. Ethernans.'

'But, Robert, if you were ever to turn your thoughts to marrying again—which without doubt it is your duty to do—it would not be my place to remain.'

Robert looked out of the window without speaking. 'You could please yourself,' he at length suggested.

'But if my house were sold,' said poor Miss Grizel, relapsing into Scotch, 'I couldna' win in.'

Her nephew apparently thought that this was a trite observation, which needed no reply, for he made none, and Miss Grizel did not know how to pursue the subject.

'Then about Elsie,' she said after a short pause. 'She is getting too old for a nurse—she is nearly six.'

'Can a child of six read and write?' inquired Robert.

Elsie can't read, the monkey! She ought to, but she will not learn with the nurse. It's time she had a governess.'

Robert gazed at his aunt for some time with an impenetrable countenance, then walked out of the room. A few minutes later Miss Grizel saw him from the window digging up thistles in the field with his spud, as though he had no other object in life.

'Mercy! what use is it speaking to Robert?' she said to herself. 'He takes no more heed to anything you say than a graven eemage. There he is, away plowtering in the wet, and'll come in without a dry thread on him! *That'll* not learn Elsie to read, nor yet provide a house for me.'

Some little time after this the Laird suddenly observed at breakfast, 'I've got a what-do-you-call-it for Elsie.'

'A what, Robert?' exclaimed Miss Grizel, in great astonishment.

'A German one,' continued Robert tranquilly.

'You don't mean a governess?' said Miss Grizel. 'Oh, Robert! and never to tell me! and me been hunting one high and low for the last three weeks! Have you engaged her?'

‘Coming to-morrow afternoon,’ replied Robert.

‘Well, I wash my hands of you!’ said Miss Grizel, rising in wrath. ‘You’ll just ruin your own child, and I had better go away and leave you, since I am to have no say in her bringing up.’

The Laird seemed a little disconcerted. ‘Better think it over,’ he said.

‘I just cannot abide thae foreigners,’ said Miss Grizel. ‘I’ll go back to St. Ethernans at the term.’

‘Please yourself, then,’ returned her nephew.

Miss Grizel’s conscience smote her a good deal after this; she was conscious of having lost her temper, and she greatly dreaded leaving little Elsie, who was her chief delight and pride. She would gladly have remained, had the Laird given her the least encouragement to do so; but he seemed to consider the matter settled, and pride prevented her making any further overtures. The following ‘Whitsunday term,’ therefore, found her installed in her little house at St. Ethernans, which she never afterwards left.

Miss Grizel did not, however, at all cease to concern herself with her little niece’s upbringing. In spite of her aversion to foreigners, she could not continue to dislike Fräulein Meyer, who proved to be a sensible, cheerful person, possessed of much cleverness and tact.

‘Still one never knows,’ Miss Grizel would say. ‘These Germans may have a queer-like religion; and as to Robert with his godless ways, *he’ll* take no heed of the child. He might let her go to the Free Kirk, or to no kirk at all, for what I know.’

So it came to pass that Elsie’s Sundays were always spent with her aunt. They went together to the little Episcopal Church as often as there was service there, which was only on alternate Sundays, as one clergyman had to do duty between it and Lord Ochil’s private chapel at Drumsheugh. The church itself was curiously small and dark, and looked outside like any ordinary dwelling-house, except that it had an arched doorway and latticed windows. It was a remnant of the old nonjuring days, when it was criminal

for a Scotch Episcopal clergyman to read the service to a congregation of more than five persons, and meetings were held in secret. Inside, the church was appropriately fitted up, and a small organ had been added, but no enlargement of the building had been thought necessary, as the congregation was very poor, consisting chiefly of the fisher folk, many of whom in that part of Scotland are Episcopalians. On the Sundays when there was no service there, Elsie and her governess went to the parish church, whilst Miss Grizel sat at home and read the prayers to herself. 'It was not for the likes of her,' she would remark, 'to go to thae places.' Not that she thought it wrong to attend a Presbyterian place of worship; on the contrary, she quite approved of Elsie doing so, and she had a great respect for the worthy minister, Dr. Cleghorn, and his wife; but she was so thoroughly conservative in all her instincts that she liked to keep up even the memory of old prejudices and traditions. After service Elsie dined with Aunt Grizel, and then underwent a sort of catechising; she had to repeat the collect for the day, the Church catechism, one of the Scottish paraphrases, and the names of the books of the Old and New Testaments in their order, both backwards and forwards; which last exercise was regarded by Aunt Grizel as indispensable to her spiritual welfare. After this, she was allowed to read, or to do what she pleased, until tea, or until Fräulein Meyer, who had meanwhile been passing the time with her friend, Mrs. Cleghorn, should think fit to appear and convey her home. After Elsie's confirmation the religious exercises were discontinued, but still her Sundays were spent with her aunt. No wonder Miss Grizel was restless and troubled that evening; she had schooled herself to believe that Elsie's departure was the best thing that could happen under the circumstances, but it was like losing the light of her eyes to part with the girl. One of her maxims, however, was that the young should be taught to think themselves of no importance to their elders, so she would show no outward sign of regret when Elsie bade her good-bye.

'If Robert had only taken my advice and married ten

years ago—but he was always a thrawn creature,' she said to herself. 'What ailed him at Margaret Ferguson? But what is done is done, it is just a dispensation of Providence, and all is ordered for the best.' With this pious reflection, rather doubtfully uttered, however, Aunt Grizel betook herself to bed.

CHAPTER V.

‘What I hae done through lack of wit
I never, never can reca’;
I trust you’re a’ my friends as yet,
Good-night, and joy be with you a’.’

ELSIE’S few last days at Rossie were fast slipping away, and some of her farewell visits had already been paid. She had none to make amongst those of her own class, for her only friends in the neighbourhood, Lord and Lady Ochil, at Drumsheugh, were then absent, to her great regret. For the last year or two, indeed, she had scarcely seen them, except on the Sundays when they came to St. Ethernans to church, as the Laird had unluckily taken offence at Lord Ochil for some trifling cause, and difficulties were apt to be raised whenever Elsie wished to visit them. It was a great loss to the girl; she was a favourite with Lady Ochil, who was a kind motherly woman with a number of children of her own. ‘A set of wild, ill-behaved brats,’ Aunt Grizel called them, but Elsie delighted in a day or two spent at Drumsheugh amongst all the noise and merriment, and the change from the monotonous life at Rossie was very good for her.

About the farmsteading and in the cottages, however, Elsie had many friends, and she was careful that not one should be omitted in her round of visits.

‘I wonder if there is anything they would like before I go,’ she thought. So she ransacked all her little possessions for parting gifts, and where there were children she distributed pots of jam, despoiling the store-room without remorse.

'If Euphemia is so good at making jam she may just make an extra quantity this year,' she remarked aside to Hans as she filled her baskets. Then she set off with her gifts, offering to every one as well her pretty words of regret at leaving them. There was Sandy Duncan the grieve, and his wife, and the farm-labourers, with their wives and families, who lived in the row of cottages below the steading. There was Angus Cameron the shepherd, a Highlander from Lochaber, whose cottage stood all by itself amongst the fields of short grass near the sea. He had a wife too, and innumerable red-haired children, who were continually being caught trespassing in the woods by the Laird, and threatened by him with the utmost rigour of the law. There was Miss Petrie the seamstress, who inhabited quite a smart little house, and made clothes for the whole country-side. There was Tibbie Law the old post-woman, who brought out the letters and parcels daily, and whose cart and old white horse were constantly to be seen on the road between Rossie and St. Ethernans. She was invariably drunk, which was the chief cause of the late postal delivery, but nobody seemed to notice or regret this circumstance, and no harm, curiously enough, ever befell either her or her letter-bags. And besides the people, there were all her favourite haunts to be visited; the 'den,' with its pretty little brown burn, whose banks were now yellow with primroses; the hollow ash tree, where as a child she used to 'play at houses,' and which was still handsomely furnished with broken crockery; and the shore, which she liked best of all, but to which Hans was not so partial, owing to the absence of rabbits' holes.

Sandy Duncan and his wife stood at the door of their cottage watching Elsie as she went slowly home with her empty basket.

'Oor young leddy,' observed Sandy graciously, is raily an ornament till her sect.'

'She's a bonny crater and a gude,' answered his wife, wiping her eyes with her apron. 'And her no to get leave to bide in her ain mither's hoose! The Laird should tak' shame till himsel'—as he should. Siccan a mairriage!'

'Woman,' said Sandy, with his usual oratorical wave of the hand, 'ye hae nae skeel o' the law. The estate o' Rossie, wi' a' that appertains till't, would pass——'

'Hoot, awa' wi' your estates, ye haverel!' replied Mrs. Duncan with ineffable scorn, yet willing to escape an argument to which she felt herself unequal. 'I'm awa' to the kye.'

So saying, she took up her milk-pails and departed, cutting short an oration which her husband was about to deliver on the whole genealogy of the Rossie family, combined with a homily on the impropriety of speaking evil of 'deegnitics.'

It was Elsie's last day at home; she was to start for Edinburgh the next morning, and she was sitting in the drawing-room writing labels, or 'libels' as Bella called them, for her boxes. The day was wet, and the Laird had been wandering disconsolately about the house, as his custom was, when the weather was unfavourable. He had now come into the drawing-room, and Elsie became aware that his eyes were fixed upon her as she wrote. She looked up, pen in hand; the Laird eyed her fiercely.

'Did you want anything, papa?' she asked.

'You're a good creature, Elsie. Your mother was a good creature.'

With this remark, delivered with startling abruptness, the Laird bolted out of the room, leaving his daughter too entirely transfixed with astonishment to move or speak. He came back in a minute or two with a large blue envelope in his hand.

'Have you money?' he demanded.

'Not enough for my journey, papa. I was going to ask you for some.'

'Count that,' said the Laird. Elsie obeyed.

'But—— is not this more than I shall need?'

'See that you travel respectably,' said her father. 'I hate your cheap excursions. I suppose you'll take that idiot with you.'

'That idiot' meant Janet, as all the household knew.

'Janet might see me into the train, papa, if you think it

best ; but I shall not take anybody to England with me—except Hans, of course.’

‘You’re surely not going to take that brute to any decent house !’ said the Laird, with well-feigned astonishment.

‘Aunt Caroline expects him,’ answered Elsie promptly. ‘I wrote to tell her he was coming.’

Her father glanced at Hans as he lay on the rug in front of the fire, his sides somewhat distended after a recent meal ; he moved the end of his tail deprecatingly on being looked at, and turned up the white of one eye.

‘Far better have it destroyed,’ murmured the Laird. But this was not said decisively or with authority, and Elsie knew that no further objection would be raised against Hans accompanying her. ‘Your uncle will pay your allowance regularly. I’ve made arrangements, and I’ve doubled it. If they don’t treat you well at that place you can come back.’

‘When shall I come back, papa?’

The Laird did not answer for a moment, then he turned to leave the room.

‘Come back when you please, of course,’ said he as he went away.

Elsie’s journey was rather a complicated one. She drove to St. Ethernans and thence took the ferry-boat, which crossed to Drumsheugh and back ‘every lawful day.’ From Drumsheugh the coach conveyed her to Crossbriggs Junction, where she had to wait half an hour for the train going south to Edinburgh. She dismissed Janet, as the coach returned immediately, and walked wearily up and down the long gusty platform, leading Hans by a little chain. A chill east wind was blowing, sweeping disconsolately through the draughty station, reddening the noses of the passengers and blowing dust into their eyes. Elsie could not help thinking how unlovely her fellow-creatures looked under these circumstances ; the men standing about in groups discussing the price of barley or some knotty point in politics, and clearing their throats from time to time with unnecessary vehemence. The women mostly looked cold and care-

worn, standing huddled together in knots of two or three, or sitting on the benches, each grasping several baskets, bundles, or babies, as the case might be; while one or two damsels, arrayed in what they were pleased to call 'Pairis faashions,' walked up and down arm in arm with a jaunty air.

The half hour had lengthened out into three quarters; at last the porter rang a huge bell just behind Elsie's car, and the train came thundering up. She took Hans in her arms, and was, in her anxiety, about to struggle into a smoking-compartment, when, 'Allow me, Miss Ross,' said a voice close to her, and Elsie recognised the well-known accents of Mr. Macrae. 'Permit me to assist you—you will find the next carriage more commodious.'

'Oh, thank you, Mr. Macrae,' said Elsie, glad to see him for the first time in her life, as he put her and her possessions into the carriage. 'And there is your canine favourite. Poor little fellow!' said Mr. Macrae, attempting to pat Hans, who was ungrateful enough to reply with a growl. 'Vigilant as ever, I see!' he continued magnanimously. 'A capital guardian, Miss Ross, first class!'

'It is very bad of him to growl at his friends,' said Elsie, who felt quite warmed and cheered by the friendly voice and manner. 'Thank you so much—good-bye!' and the train moved slowly off, leaving Mr. Macrae standing on the platform flourishing his hat with much grace.

Once more Elsie caught sight of the bay and the hills before the railway line took a turn to the west. She looked out for them anxiously. It had been cloudy when she crossed the ferry, so that the higher hills were hidden, and to the fanciful girl there came a thought that she would look upon this view for the last time, and that its aspect, whether dark or bright, would be a portent of her future life. She had expected the scene to be gloomy and threatening; but when it came into sight, she could scarcely repress a cry of wonder.

Before her lay a milk-white sea; the heavy cloud-masses had rolled back and now hung over the hills, which shaded

- in colour from blue-black to violet. As she looked the clouds overhead parted a little, and a ray of light struck down upon the white water, changing it to pale gold. It was a strange and beautiful sight, and one which Elsie never forgot ; but a moment later the train dashed into a tunnel, and she saw the sea no more.

CHAPTER VI.

' Oh ! Leezie, lass, ye maun ken little
If sac be ye dinna ken me,
For I am Lord Ronald Macdonald,
A chieftain of high degree.'

IN the drawing-room of No. — Regent Place, Edinburgh, two ladies were sitting, a mother and daughter. The room was evidently prepared for company; the chairs and sofas had been stripped of their chintz covers, and appeared in all the glory of crimson plush and brass nails. They looked almost as if they missed their covering, and were uneasily conscious of their bare legs and arms. Most of the furniture had been pushed back against the wall, leaving a large empty space in the middle of the floor, which might be very necessary when the room was crowded with guests, but, in the meantime, presented a somewhat waste and desert appearance. In the inner drawing-room, beyond the large folding door, a table was laid for tea. Sugar and cream were there, and cakes of different sorts, also vast numbers of teacups and saucers, but nothing hot had as yet made its appearance. The polished hearth had been newly swept, and the fire made as small as it is possible for a fire to be.

'Now they can come as soon as they like, Margaret,' said Mrs. Ferguson, opening the window as she spoke, to let in a little more of the keen east wind. 'I think the room is well aired.'

'Dear me, yes, mother,' said Margaret rather crossly, 'it's very cold.'

'It'll be hot enough before we're done,' said Mrs. Ferguson with a sigh.

'I do think, mother,' Margaret said, walking to the window and shutting it with a snap, 'you could not have chosen a more awkward day for your tea-party. Elsie Ross will be here long before they're all gone.'

'Well, what does it matter?' answered her mother. 'She'll just come in for a nice chat with a few friends.'

'She'll come in for cold tea, that's certain,' said Margaret. 'But, hark! there's the door-bell.'

Mrs. Ferguson smoothed out her silk dress, and looked around her with complacency; Margaret also summoned up a hospitable smile. Both ladies were fond of society and a little gossip, but their rather limited means prevented them from giving any very costly entertainments to their friends, and their style of living was, perhaps, a little old-fashioned. One or two *large* afternoon teas, as on the present occasion, and a great number of smaller ones, were usually the extent of their home gaieties during the season.

Margaret Ferguson could scarcely be called a *young* lady, though her manner and dress were youthful for her time of life, which might be thirty-five or thereabouts. She was still handsome and well preserved; a fine figure of a woman, her friends used to say of her. Her dark brown hair was still abundant, and she made the most of it; her eyes were also fine, and she could use them in a manner which was considered highly effective. She was fond, too, of a little showiness in dress, and wore, that afternoon, a gown of some brown material, relieved by trimmings of bright yellow silk; amber beads were round her neck, and at her throat were two or three of the star-shaped yellow daffodils then in flower. Mrs. Ferguson had been a beauty in her day, though few traces of it now remained. She was a stout, comfortable looking lady, easy-going and good humoured. She, like her daughter, was fond of ornament, but, in consideration of her widowed state, her dress was of black silk, adorned only with numerous jet beads and bugles.

The peals at the door-bell soon became incessant, and the room began to fill rapidly. Margaret's tea-table was

surrounded by a circle of young men, with whom her good looks and lively manner rendered her very popular. She made them useful in handing round cakes and cups of tea, and kept up a continual flow of talk and laughter in the inner room, towards which all the young people of the party were gradually attracted; some of the girls talking to the young men of their acquaintance, others grouped together, confidentially discussing their partners at the last ball, or descanting upon the ugliness of their friends' clothes.

In the larger drawing-room, where Mrs. Ferguson presided, more serious subjects were under discussion. The younger married ladies drew together, and compared their children's ages and constitutions, or condoled with one another on the shortcomings of their servants; while the elder matrons and spinsters were long since embarked on floods of church gossip, according to their different denominations; varied by a little mild scandal, and some dissertations upon diseases.

Next to Mrs. Ferguson, in the chair of state, sat a large and ponderous lady in a velvet mantle. There was, somehow, an appearance of wealth about her, which commanded every one's respect, and her opinion was listened to with deference. This lady belonged, in fact, to no less a family than the Stewarts of Knockbrichachan, and, having married Mr. Macdonald-Smith, a wealthy wine-merchant, there was no end to her importance, or to the respect which she inspired.

'I think,' said Mrs. Ferguson to this personage, 'I saw your carriage at the door of St. Barnabas' Church on Sunday afternoon.'

'I went to hear your new curate,' replied Mrs. Macdonald-Smith. 'He looks very emaciated, poor young man. Have you made his acquaintance?'

'He's scarcely to be seen out of the pulpit,' said Mrs. Ferguson, shaking her head. 'I asked him to his dinner a while ago, but no! he wasn't going out. I forget the reason—it was one of their church days, I think, when they stay in.'

'Ah, well! very proper, I daresay,' said Mrs. Macdonald-Smith. 'Duties are different in different stations. Did you and your daughter go to the New Club ball, Mrs. Ferguson?'

'Oh yes! we did, and very good it was. Margaret was dancing away—she never tires. A terrible want of gentlemen though! I was quite sorry for the poor girls that got no dancing. There they were, poor things, standing round the wall thick! each with their programme in their hands, and never a partner to their name!' And kind Mrs. Ferguson sighed deeply at the recollection of this moving spectacle.

'By the bye, Mrs. Macdonald-Smith,' she continued presently, 'we are expecting a young friend this afternoon, who will make a sensation, I'm thinking, when she comes out. I'm not sure but what she's a connection of yours—Elsie Ross of Rossie. She's Helen Lindsay's daughter—do you recollect *her*?'

'Helen Lindsay? I remember her well, and a beautiful creature she was,' said Mrs. Macdonald-Smith, with more animation than she had hitherto displayed. 'You are quite right, Mrs. Ferguson, she *was* related to the Stewarts. Does her daughter inherit her good looks?'

'Well—she's a graceful creature,' said Mrs. Ferguson, considering. 'A mere slip of a thing, you know—wants filling out—but pretty, and a nice frank girl too. No awkward school-girl ways about her. Margaret thinks she'll be a beauty—I've not seen her for two years. It's almost time she was here,' she added, glancing at the clock on the chimney-piece.

'I hope you won't hurry away, Mrs. Macdonald-Smith,'—as that lady showed signs of moving,—'it will be a real pleasure to introduce her to you.'

By this time some of the guests had departed, and the rooms were becoming empty. Margaret still appeared engrossed in conversation, but all the time she kept a bright look-out, and she was the first to hear the door-bell which announced Elsie's arrival. In a minute she was on the stair, and stood still to make sure that it was the expected

guest, reflecting with some vexation that, after a long journey, Elsie's appearance would scarcely be calculated to make the impression she desired. 'And dressed in black, too, I declare, like a little nun,' she said, half impatiently, as a slender dark figure emerged from the cab, leading a little brown dog by a chain.

'Well! Elsie dear,'—flying downstairs to meet her and kissing her warmly,—'how are you? Very tired after your journey? So you've brought your little dog—that's right! Trouble? not a bit! bring a whole kennel if you like. My dear child, we've got a tea-party. Come into this room a minute.'

She hastily drew the girl into a large bedroom on the ground floor, filled with ladies' cloaks and wraps. 'You won't mind coming upstairs to see them for a little? They'll soon be gone.'

'If my clothes are good enough,' said Elsie doubtfully rather anxious for an excuse not to appear.

'You look very nice, dear. Take off your heavy jacket, and let me arrange your handkerchief. So! If only I had a flower to pin here! Ah! you've got one yourself, clever child!' as Elsie offered her a bunch of dark velvety auriculas, which she had brought from home.

'There! they look lovely against the cream-coloured handkerchief. Keep on your hat—it's very becoming—now! Oh, the dog! Jo-an! she called—Elsie's eyebrows went up in a little surprise—Jo-an!' and one of the maids who had been carrying in the trunks appeared.

'Here, Jo-an, is Miss Ross's dog—give it some food, and keep it till the company's gone. And—stop, Jo-an, don't let it worry the cat. Come along, Elsie darling.'

Elsie submitted to be led to the drawing-room, feeling rather confused at the buzz of strange voices which greeted her ears. Margaret placed her in a chair by the tea-table, and glanced round her for a moment. 'Well, Captain Foulis, *you* look very tired,' she said, addressing a young man who was leaning languidly against the door. 'Are you too exhausted to fetch me the tea-pot and kettle from the next room? They're by the fire.'

The young man seemed a trifle unwilling, but went obediently.

'He gives himself ridiculous airs,' whispered Margaret—'he's very well connected though—and dances beautifully. Many thanks,' said she aloud, taking the things from him. 'You really deserve a reward. Let me introduce you to Miss Ross, Captain Foulis.'

Elsie looked round in vain for Mrs. Ferguson; but that lady, all unconscious of her arrival, was serenely prattling on to her friends in the larger room, whither Elsie had not yet been conducted. There was no help for it—she must drink her tea and make conversation for Captain Foulis; who, after pulling his moustache and gazing at the ceiling as if in thought, at length drew a chair close to her, and proceeded to make himself as agreeable as he knew how.

She overheard Margaret meanwhile giving warm invitations to several young people for a dance the following evening. 'Just a few couples, you know—nothing grand,' she said. 'Captain Foulis, I hope you will come if you've nothing better to do. Can you? at eight o'clock—just a small early affair.'

The well-connected one, after again consulting the ceiling, replied that he would leave it open, if she didn't mind. He did not exactly remember what his engagements were, but would 'put in an appearance' if he could. He then took leave, and Elsie said hastily, 'Margaret, where is Mrs. Ferguson?'

Margaret laughed, and led her into the next room. She was going to have teased her mother jestingly about her inattention to her guest, but the presence of Mrs. Macdonald-Smith awed her into decorum, and made even Mrs. Ferguson's kindly greeting a little stiffer than it would naturally have been. Elsie was presented to the great lady in due form; and the latter, after surveying her through her gold-rimmed eyeglass, was condescending enough to discover that she possessed the form of eyebrow peculiar to the Stewarts of Knockbrichachan. 'Mine are exactly the same shape, my dear, you will observe,' said she. She then proceeded to examine Elsie as to her precise

degree of relationship to that illustrious house, on which point she found her lamentably ignorant.

'And then they intermarried, my dear, with the Lindsays of Corinzean. That reminds me, Mrs. Ferguson, I have a letter from my good old friend, Mrs. Macdonald of Ardvoira. They are expecting the young heir to be down this summer; he is home from India on leave. A very fine youth, I am told.'

'Indeed?' said Mrs. Ferguson. 'He'll be Lord Corinzean too some day, will he not? Now attend, Elsie! this is your cousin, you know, only once removed. His father and your mother were first cousins.'

'His mother, Lady Eleanor, is married again,' said Mrs. Macdonald-Smith quickly, 'to a Mr. Fitzgerald—Irish extraction, I fancy—and she has a younger son; not a Fitzgerald though—a Lindsay. There are several between young David Lindsay and the peerage, but he'll come to it through time. That is, humanly speaking, of course.'—A sigh. 'Those Corinzeans have no right to be long-lived.'

Elsie was tired, and felt no interest in the subject. She was familiar with the names, Ardvoira, Knockbrichachan, Corinzean (pronounced Coringan), as she had heard them from Aunt Grizel, who was also fond of genealogical research, and they had invariably wearied her very much. 'It is very hard,' thought she, 'that I should be annoyed with them here as well;' and great was her relief when Mrs. Macdonald-Smith departed, followed presently by the other guests.

The energetic Margaret now came bustling up.

'Well!' said she, 'I don't think it went off badly at all. Dear me! how tired you both look!'

Mrs. Ferguson had sunk back in her arm-chair, and, casting her company manners to the winds, was mopping her face and fanning herself with her pocket handkerchief.

'Oh, my dears!' said she, 'what a day this has been! Oh me, but it's warm! Margaret, open a bit o' the window.'

'Well, mother, go and lie down on your bed if you're

tired, and don't get rheumatism. · I'll send Jo-an to set the room to rights. Elsie, come upstairs, dear child.'

She took Elsie to the room prepared for her; and, with real kindness, as she noticed the girl's weary looks, attended to her wants, and made her promise to take 'a good rest.'

Finally, she fetched Hans, whose delight at being restored to his mistress expressed itself in curious little squeaks, and in scampering round the room with his tail arched until he was quite exhausted, and had to lie down, panting.

CHAPTER VII.

‘ Enter THAMES with two attendants.

Thame. Here I am, sir.

Puff. Very well, indeed ! See, gentlemen, there’s a river for you !

Sneer. But pray, who are those gentlemen in green with him ?

Puff. Those ?—those are his banks.

Sneer. His banks ?

Puff. Yes, one crowned with alders and the other with a villa—you take the allusions ?’

THIS was not by any means Elsie’s first visit to the Fergusons. She had spent a little time with them in Edinburgh nearly every year, and on former occasions had generally enjoyed herself very much. Margaret amused her and was kind ; the streets and shops were full of fascination to the country girl ; and the exceeding beauty of the town was in itself a happiness to her. But somehow, this time, the Fergusons and their surroundings wearied her inexpressibly. She felt sad and depressed at leaving home, where at least she was free, and not utterly dependent upon others ; she longed to escape from Margaret’s restless activity, and Mrs. Ferguson’s perpetual small gossip ; their thoughts and ways were not, and never could be, hers ; and a feeling of dismay crept over her, as she thought what her life would be if her new relations did not prove more congenial to her.

She was not left long, however, to indulge in these or any other speculations ; Margaret soon came in to stir her up, and for the rest of her visit she was never left alone again. The next day was spent in shopping, paying calls, and in a revision of Elsie’s wardrobe, at which Mrs. Fer-

guson assisted, though her opinion was treated with contempt by her daughter, who was only disposed to agree with her when she remarked that Elsie's dresses were much too 'sombre' for a girl of her age. Margaret was feverishly anxious that her dance should be a success, and that Elsie should make a good appearance at it, so part of the afternoon was devoted to an impromptu dancing lesson; Mrs. Ferguson being set to play dance music, in which both she and Margaret excelled. This Elsie quite enjoyed, as she did the dance itself, although she dreaded it beforehand, and had gone through a good deal of worry over her dressing. However, even Margaret found her white India muslin frock pretty and suitable, and rejected with scorn the scarlet geraniums with which Mrs. Ferguson proposed to 'lighten it up.' Everything went off admirably, as Margaret's entertainments usually did; and she felt amply repaid for the trouble she had taken, as she watched Elsie's lovely face, and the childish grace of her movements, and saw how much she was sought after.

'You are quite a success, my child!' she exclaimed enthusiastically, as she lit Elsie's bedroom candle. 'I *should* like to have you here longer! All the young men would be at your feet. You might be a little more free and easy with them though—they like it better.'

'Margaret,' said Elsie solemnly, sitting down on the edge of her bed, 'I am perfectly *sick* of young men. Do you know how many I have had introduced to me since I came here?'

Margaret stared at her.

'Good gracious, child!' she said, 'how many then?'

'No less than sixteen!' replied Elsie, keeping her large eyes fixed upon Margaret with a tragic expression. 'And they all made exactly the same remarks.'

'Well, what would you have?' said Margaret. 'They don't set up to be geniuses. And as to their number, let me tell you, Elsie, that it is not everybody here, in Edinburgh, who could have *collected* sixteen agreeable well-bred young men in two days.'

Elsie blushed at this reproof, the severity of which was unlike Margaret's usual gay good-nature.

'Oh no, Margaret dear!' said she, fearing she had been rude, 'I know that—and I think it very clever of you to collect them, and very kind—but—I can't talk to them as you do. I do not think I feel to care about young men much.'

'You're a perfect baby, that's what you are,' said Margaret good-humouredly. 'It's time you were in bed, so I'll go.'

'Good-night, Margaret,' said Elsie, kissing her affectionately. 'I liked the dance very very much.'

As the Fergusons will not appear again in these pages, which are merely a chronicle of Elsie Ross's experiences, it may be well to mention here that Margaret was married a year or two later to Dr. Ainslie, a physician of considerable celebrity, who inhabited a handsome house at the west end of the town. Here Margaret was able to go more into society, and to give entertainments during the Edinburgh season of a most brilliant and fashionable kind. As Mrs. Ferguson continued to live with her daughter, she was no less benefited by the change in her circumstances.

Elsie and Hans quitted Edinburgh the following morning, and in due time arrived at King's Cross. As she stepped upon the platform and looked around her bewildered, a footman in blue and yellow livery came up, and touched his hat rather doubtfully.

'Are you from General Lindsay?' she asked, a little surprised. 'How kind of them,' she added mentally, 'to send a footman to meet me! and such an enormous one too!' and she surveyed William's six feet of stature with some admiration.

'Yes, miss,' said the footman. 'I will attend to your luggage, miss, and your—ahem—dawg. Parkins is here, miss, if you please.'

'These are both my boxes. Please show me which is Parkins. I will keep the dog.'

Mindful of Marjorie's story, Elsie had expected to find in Parkins a smart youthful-looking lady's-maid, and could hardly believe her eyes when a little wizened elderly woman, soberly dressed, and carrying a large reticule, accosted her.

She felt the sharp little black eyes scrutinising her critically, but Parkins addressed her in honeyed tones : 'Miss Ross ! This will be a happy day for my dear master and mistress. You must be very much fatigued, miss ?'

'Thank you for coming to meet me, Parkins,' said Elsie with a smile. 'I did not expect it. Are we to sleep in London ?'

'I have engaged rooms, miss, at a nice quiet 'otel. Mistress thought, if you were not too tired, we might travel 'ome to-morrow afternoon.'

Elsie made no objection, but got into the cab, while Parkins produced a telegraph form from her reticule, and wrote as follows :—'From Priscilla Parkins, King's Cross Station, to Mrs. Lindsay, The Elms, Chippingham. Our dear young lady just arrived. Met at station by self and William. We trust not over-fatigued. Train punctual.'

'Pray read it, miss,' said Parkins, presenting the document to Elsie with some pride. 'I think that will relieve dear mistress's mind.'

Elsie warmly congratulated Parkins upon her skill in writing telegrams, and particularly upon the fact that there were exactly twenty words in this message. The thoughtful Parkins had, indeed, been engaged in its composition for a considerable time before Elsie's arrival, but she only answered modestly, 'I 'ave 'ad the blessing of a good education, miss, and I 'ope I 'ave profited by it in some measure.'

William was now entrusted with the missive, and charged to send it off at once, after which the party proceeded to a small hotel near Paddington Station, where they passed the night.

The following forenoon was rather tedious to Elsie ; it was spent in going to various shops in a four-wheeled cab, accompanied by the faithful Parkins, who refused to let her charge out of her sight for an instant, and who did not consider 'an 'ansom' a respectable conveyance for a young lady.

The views of London to be obtained out of a cab window are necessarily limited, and Elsie's first impressions

of the metropolis were far from enthusiastic. In the afternoon she and her attendants started on their homeward journey, which was not a very long one.

As they neared Chippingham Elsie looked about her anxiously. She saw low flat meadows, now beginning to be yellow with buttercups; wide ditches bordered with rows of pollarded willows; glimpses now and again of a slow and stately river, full to the brim, soaking through beds of rushes; here and there a snug little village, with neat cottages and gardens, and orchard trees covered with white and pink blossom. Then rows of mean-looking brick houses, some only half built, a public-house, and a few shops; they were approaching a larger town.

'Here we are, miss,' said Parkins, collecting her parcels as the train entered the station.

A brougham with a pair of sleek bay horses was awaiting them. They left the town and drove leisurely along a suburban road, with high brick walls on each side, which shut in the villa gardens, until they came to a large iron gate painted white, and thrown hospitably open. Elsie's heart beat fast as the wheels crunched upon the gravel drive, and the carriage drew up at the door of a good-sized red brick house of rather uninteresting appearance. Elsie had neither time nor inclination at that moment, however, to criticise its exterior. She was greeted on the threshold by a deafening chorus of barking, as two pug dogs precipitated themselves upon Hans to his great terror, while his mistress found herself tightly clasped in the embrace of her Aunt Caroline.

A little woman, possessed of considerable muscular strength of arm,—such was Elsie's first impression; she had to stoop low to kiss her.

'My darling child!' said Mrs. Lindsay in an agitated voice, at length releasing her. She passed on to speak a word to Parkins, and Elsie had time to observe her. A plump, yet active little figure, in a prune-coloured silk dress, an Indian shawl round her shoulders, and on her head a mob-cap with velvet bows.

'Shall I like her or dislike her?' thought Elsie, trying

furtively to catch a view of her aunt's face. But she could not make up her mind. It was a bright, rather pleasant face, and there was an air of decision and energy about her which, upon the whole, attracted Elsie. There was not a silver thread in the black hair, but the cap with its lace frills which Mrs. Lindsay wore gave a softness to the face which perhaps it had lacked in youth; the black eyes were piercing and a trifle hard.

The first greetings over, Elsie was led into the drawing-room, a large airy room on the ground floor. The furniture was modern, but there was no 'high art' or æsthetic colouring about it, everything was bright even to gaudiness. The walls were white and gold, so were the doors; the chairs and sofas were covered, some with a bright chintz, others with bead and worsted work in various patterns. Beside Mrs. Lindsay's easy-chair stood a work-table littered over with scraps of calico of many colours. The French windows opened upon the garden; outside there was a verandah, where a great wisteria grew, twisting and climbing round the pillars. When this was in flower it formed a perfect bower of bloom, but now the brown shoots were just coming out, and it was merely conspicuous by its rough knotted stem.

A thin, middle-aged lady rose from a wicker arm-chair as they entered, and came to meet them with a sort of nervous haste. The crotchet shawl she had been working dropped from her hands, and instantly became a prey to the larger of the two pugs, whose indiscreet behaviour showed that he had scarcely yet emerged from puppyhood. The lady was introduced as 'my dear cousin and friend, Miss Maynard.' She advanced hurriedly towards Elsie and made one or two movements in the direction of her face, as if uncertain whether to kiss her or not. Elsie bent to receive the salute, but finding that Miss Maynard only made one or two ineffectual little dabs in the air, she at length decided to give up the attempt.

'But where is my dearest Henry?' cried Mrs. Lindsay.

'He was here but a moment ago,' answered Miss Maynard, eagerly looking round her on the floor, as if she hoped

to pick up General Lindsay off the carpet. But his wife darted into the passage, and presently returned clinging to the arm of an old gentleman, who, it turned out, had been vainly searching for his niece amongst the luggage.

'*Here* is our dear niece, my Henry!' said Mrs. Lindsay, with deep feeling in her tone.

'Eh, what?' said the General, folding Elsie in another embrace. 'I am glad to see you; I forget your name, my dear—Helen, eh?'

'No, Uncle Henry, Elsie—Elsie Ross. Helen was my mother's name,' she added softly.

Elsie had not expected to find her greatuncle so old and feeble looking a man. He must have been at least twenty years older than his wife, who looked upwards of fifty. His features were finely chiselled, and his complexion had the ivory whiteness of one which had been fair in youth. A black velvet skull-cap covered his bald head, and a long silvery white beard added to his venerable appearance.

He took up a position on the hearth-rug and surveyed his niece with evident complacency, rubbing his hands and chuckling to himself.

'And how did you leave them all at Rossie?' said he. 'Father got married, I hear. Grand wedding, eh?'

Mrs. Lindsay shook her head and frowned at her husband, but Elsie made answer calmly, 'The wedding took place to-day, I believe, Uncle Henry; it was to be very quiet.'

'Quiet, was it?' said the General. 'I thought you would have been a bridesmaid.'

'Henry!' said Mrs. Lindsay.

'They *should* have made you a bridesmaid, my dear,' pursued the General, rubbing his hands again. 'Stepmother good-looking, eh?'

'*Hennery!*' said Mrs. Lindsay—and a dead silence fell upon the company.

At this juncture the General providentially caught sight of Hans, which diverted his attention. 'Eh!' said he, 'what's that? a seal, eh?'

Everybody laughed at this, and Mrs. Lindsay shook her husband playfully by the shoulder.

'You foolish, dear man! Put on your spectacles,' said she.

Elsie hastened to apologise for bringing Hans into a household which appeared to be already so well provided with dogs, but General Lindsay was fond of animals, and Hans was soon at home upon his knee.

'And now, my love,' said Aunt Caroline briskly, 'you would like to see your own little nest, I daresay. Come, you and I will go upstairs together.'

Mrs. Lindsay ushered Elsie upstairs accordingly, stopping several times during the ascent to pant, not because she was in the least out of breath, but in order to impress upon her niece's mind the fact that an unusual honour was being done her, and that it was not every young visitor who was personally conducted to her apartment. It is to be feared that this mark of condescension was lost upon Elsie, but her evident pleasure in the room to which she was taken quite satisfied her aunt. It was very bright and fresh with its pink and white draperies. The walls were hung with illuminated texts, and the view from the window was the same as that from the drawing-room, but more extensive, for beyond the garden and the paddock the river could be seen, with the boats and barges passing up and down upon it.

'What a beautiful river,' exclaimed Elsie with delight.

Mrs. Lindsay nodded patronisingly. 'Your uncle and I are very fond of our dear river,' an answer which conveyed to her hearer's mind the impression that it was their own especial property; but on learning afterwards that it was the Thames, Elsie dismissed this idea.

'As you have brought no attendant, my love,' said Mrs. Lindsay, 'I have selected a well-principled young housemaid specially to wait upon you. Her name is Lucy Higgins, and she is a member of Miss Maynard's bible-class.'

She rang the bell as she spoke, and a pretty neat-looking girl appeared, curtsying and smiling. Then with another affectionate embrace and benediction, Mrs. Lindsay left the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

The blackbird amid leafy trees,
The lark above the hill,
Let loose their carols when they please,
Are quiet when they will. . . .

But we are press'd by heavy laws ;
And often, glad no more,
We wear a face of joy, because
We have been glad of yore.'

' THE ELMS, CHIPPINGHAM, *April 30th.*

' MY DEAR AUNT GRIZEL,—I put off writing my long letter till to-day, so that I might have more to tell you. The journey to London did not seem long, and they sent two servants to meet me from here—Parkins and a footman. My uncle and aunt are so very kind, but I would rather not have had P. London was very dark, and smelt of cooking, but it may not be so in all parts of the town ; I had not time to see it really well. I came here yesterday, and I do think the country in England is beautiful, so green and flowery. Think of the apple blossom being all out, and the lilacs very nearly ! This house is not exactly in the country ; it is a villa, with a large garden, however, and the river Thames is quite near, which I am very glad of. Now I must tell you about my uncle and aunt. Aunt Caroline is very affectionate ; I have never been so much kissed before. I do not quite like it, as I have done nothing at all to deserve so much kindness, and she may not like me when she comes to know me. But I hope she will. Uncle Henry is also full of affection. He is old and rather deaf, and wears a skull-cap, but he is very handsome still ; Aunt Caroline is little and not pretty. There is

another lady here called Miss Maynard; I do not know what to say about her, except that she is not strong, and seems rather afraid of Aunt Caroline. If it were not ridiculous, I would almost think she was afraid of me—I am sure she is of Hans. You will see by this that she is very nervous.

‘I have such a pretty room, with a view over the river, and I am to have a maid all to myself. There is a great number of servants in this house; I tried to count them when they came in to prayers, but I had not time to finish. At dinner there are three men-servants to wait—a butler, a footman, and a page-boy.

‘They keep a few hens here, and two cows to supply the house. The cows are Alderney, and very pretty—I think very little of the poultry. Aunt Caroline has two dogs, pugs, whose names are Pompon and Bijou. The latter is the son of the former; he is twice as big as his mother, and has not much sense.

‘I hope you are well, dearest Aunt Grizel, and have caught no cold—the wedding will be over now. I never wrote such a long letter before in my life, and must now stop. I remain, your affectionate niece,
ELSPETH ROSS.’

Elsie’s next letter was to her father; it ran as follows:—

‘MY DEAR PAPA,—I arrived here safely yesterday afternoon. Uncle Henry and Aunt Caroline are both very kind, and seem pleased to see me. There is another lady who lives here, Miss Maynard, Aunt Caroline’s cousin. I am to study with her, as she is very accomplished. The country here is mostly in grass, which is well on, and all the cows are out. They keep two Alderneys here, so I do not suppose they get much for the calves. Considering the fine pasture hereabouts, I wonder the cattle are not better looking. How are all your beasts? I hope Euphemia is also well, and that she received the little parcel safely which I sent her from London. Please excuse mistakes.—I am, your affectionate daughter,
ELSIE.’

The whole morning after Elsie’s arrival was spent by her in composing and writing the above epistles. Except for a brief note to her father when she had been absent on

a few days' visit, either at Drumsheugh or in Edinburgh, she had never had any practice in English composition, her letters to her governess being in German. It may therefore be deemed high time that she should pursue her studies under the superintendence of the accomplished Miss Maynard. A course of instruction was accordingly set on foot, which occupied two hours of each morning, whilst Mrs. Lindsay read the newspapers to her husband in his study, as it was called.

Elsie found herself rather disappointed as to the extent of Miss Maynard's attainments; for she was really anxious to learn, and loved knowledge for its own sake. Miss Maynard possessed, as Aunt Caroline was wont to say, 'a truly elegant mind.' She knew a little French and Italian, a very little music, and was fond of poetry in a feeble way. She had also a faint glimmering of history, but was very hazy as to facts. Of science she was profoundly ignorant, partly on principle, as she thought it tended to scepticism. She was, moreover, so easily shocked, and so fearful of anything which looked like immorality, that the readings in poetry were apt to come to an abrupt termination.

Hans was, of course, always present during those hours of study, and he and his mistress were both so gentle that Miss Maynard soon got over her nervous agitation, and grew warmly attached to them. As she became more at home, Elsie would put forth her own arguments and views, at first to the great surprise and alarm of her instructress.

'Miss Maynard,' she began one day, 'I am shamefully ignorant.'

'Indeed, my dear,' replied Miss Maynard, 'I do not think you so very backward; and if you continue to persevere and to pay attention, you will soon know as much as a young lady of your age and station requires. I so often deplore that fashion of the present day, young women striving to be on a par with those of the opposite sex.'

'Oh, I don't mean that,' said Elsie, feeling rather impatient of this sentiment, which she was aware was borrowed from her Aunt Caroline. 'For Miss Maynard,' thought she, 'would never dare to deplore anything by herself.'

‘I don’t mean that, but there is so very much in the world to learn about. Of course no one can hope to know it all, but one might at least try to learn something.’

Miss Maynard cleared her throat and looked doubtful.

‘A little general information,’ said she.

‘Yes,’ replied Elsie, ‘but the information in this book—’ glancing at the volume before her, which was entitled *The Keyhole of Knowledge, A Manual of Useful Instruction*—‘is so very general. It deals with each subject as if it were afraid of it.’

‘Science,’ said Miss Maynard, ‘is far from being a safe study. But if you really wish to pursue it, my dear, here is a book which has been recommended to me, called *Peeps at Physical Science*, which, I am told, will afford cultivation of the intellect without endangering our faith.

‘Is our faith so easily endangered then?’ asked Elsie. ‘Dear Miss Maynard, I cannot think it is really so shaky; if it were, it is scarcely worth having.’ She took the book from Miss Maynard’s hand, and glanced through it. ‘I do not think,’ she said, ‘that it would cultivate my intellect only to “peep” at a thing. My mind is like a garden with nothing in it—very well, this book is like a hen scratching on the top, while what it wants is to be dug with a spade. Now, supposing we took up one branch of science—I’ll tell you what, Miss Maynard; I’ll take up any one you like.’

Miss Maynard did not receive this handsome offer with enthusiasm. She sighed and hesitated a good deal, and at last ventured to hint that ‘a little botany was a pleasing study.’

Accordingly the study of botany was begun, with some degree of zeal, and after a little while it became quite a new interest to Miss Maynard, although Elsie was still unsatisfied.

These studies were regarded by Aunt Caroline with toleration, if not with sympathy. She herself found little pleasure in books of any sort, and even disliked any one to read in her presence. She occupied herself, as she expressed it, with the ‘study of character.’ The good lady

began with an excellent opinion of her own worth and talents, and did not expect any one else to be equally gifted. At first her very strong and emphatic expression of opinion upon every subject, whether she knew anything about it or not, filled Elsie with unfeigned surprise; but when she became better acquainted with her aunt, she found that it was one of that lady's articles of faith that whatsoever she herself thought, said, or did, must be, not only right, but perfect. She was very conscientious, and held strong and well-defined religious opinions; her own particular creed being, of course, infallible. There was no haziness in Mrs. Lindsay's mind, no softening shade. In her study of character, the righteous and the wicked stood out before her as two distinct classes, and she had no difficulty in pronouncing who among her acquaintance belonged to each. Elsie early discovered that her father was a prominent member of the latter class; Aunt Caroline disapproved of his very existence (on religious grounds), any casual mention of him by his daughter being received with a shake of the head, an upturning of the eyes, and the subject would be dismissed as one too dark and painful to be dwelt upon. But Elsie herself was an object of her aunt's enthusiastic affection, and she was treated in every respect as a daughter of the house. It had been a deep disappointment to Mrs. Lindsay to have no children of her own—she who was so admirably fitted to bring them up! Had it not been for her well-known piety, and great importance to mankind, she would almost have regarded it as an oversight on the part of Providence, to remedy which she had often wished to adopt a child, but the unexpected obstinacy of the General upon this point prevented the project being carried into execution. He would have no one, he said, except a relation of his own, asserting with some shrewdness, that his wife would soon tire of her orphan; who, without any claim upon him, would still have to be supported. On the death of his nephew, Colonel Lindsay, however, the General proposed to adopt his eldest son, David, then a boy at school, but his mother, Lady Eleanor, absolutely refused to give him up, and when she married

again a few years later, she still adhered to that resolution, although she encouraged the boy to make frequent visits to his granduncle by whom he was greatly beloved.

Elsie was very happy during the first few weeks of her stay at Chippingham. She enjoyed the fresh beauty of the spring weather, which was almost a revelation to her; for having spent her life on the east coast of Scotland, she had hitherto entertained quite an opposite opinion from the poets who speak of the 'merry month of May.' The rigorous punctuality and order of the household, and all Aunt Caroline's curious little ways, at first caused her nothing but amusement. The only person who dared to contradict Mrs. Lindsay was Howell, the butler, or How'll, as he was called by the General, who had never lost his strong Scotch accent. Howell was a most respectable personage, who could do everything, at least such was the popular idea. His subordinates were, William, who has already been mentioned, and an unfortunate youth named Herbert, the page-boy, who had been raised to that post on account of his proficiency as a Sunday scholar. Herbert's talents, however, were not conspicuous in any other direction; he was constantly getting into scrapes, and was usually to be seen in tears, in consequence of some rebuke from one of his numerous superiors. He had, amongst other vices, a curious knack of losing the buttons from off his suit. Elsie noticed with some interest that he never appeared with his full complement of buttons, and wondered why he always lost them off the parts which showed most. One day at dinner, Elsie, from her seat next her uncle, observed a shining object in the spoonful of soup he was about to convey to his mouth. With a sudden impulse she seized his arm, the words she intended to utter resolving themselves into an unearthly shriek. 'A—ow! don't eat that?' she said.

General Lindsay dropped his spoon, imagining that his niece had suddenly gone mad. Elsie was laughing too much to explain; but the discreet Howell, with a severe countenance, removed the plate, fished out the substance, wiped it, and presented it to his master on a salver.

‘Eh?’ said the General—‘what’s this, eh?’

‘One of ‘Erbert’s buttons, sir,’ replied Howell sternly.

The guilty Herbert burst into tears, and stood sobbing loudly, while an awe-stricken silence fell upon the company.

‘Take him away!’ said Mrs. Lindsay, waving her hand, as if he were a dish, and the offender was accordingly removed by William.

‘You have *saved* your uncle, dear,’ she continued, turning to Elsie, ‘but—might it not have been done in a more ladylike manner? Never forget *who* you are, *what* you say, nor *how* you say it.’

No one had much appetite for the rest of that meal, and for the most part there was silence, only broken by Mrs. Lindsay saying very severely to Miss Maynard, who was overcome with emotion, ‘Cecilia! unless those are tears of joy they are uncalled for.’

The good-natured General began to utter some deprecating grunts, but these were quelled by his wife, who shook her forefinger at him gravely; while Elsie wondered why any one should shed tears of joy because the General had nearly swallowed a button in his soup.

After dinner, Mrs. Lindsay, still preserving the tragic sternness of her mood, retired to the study with her husband, whence they did not emerge till it was time for prayers. Mrs. Lindsay always conducted family worship herself, and that evening it was made particularly impressive, and abounded in awful warnings to the idle and careless.

The results of this episode were, that Herbert’s voice was thick with sobs for some days afterwards; and that ‘an attack,’ from which the General suffered in the course of the next fortnight, was attributed, by his wife, to the shock his nervous system had sustained on this occasion.

These attacks, which occurred from time to time, were sufficiently alarming, to judge from the perturbation into which the whole household was thrown. What was their exact nature remained a mystery, except, it may be presumed, to the patient himself, his wife, the doctor, and (it

was believed) Parkins, who was remarkable for her medical skill.

According to Mrs. Lindsay, her husband's attacks proceeded from peculiar, and often, as it would seem, remote causes. The ungodliness of an acquaintance; the misconduct of a domestic; any vexation or disappointment which befell Mrs. Lindsay herself; or the slightest worry or anxiety, were sufficient, as she averred, to produce upon the General's sensitive frame the most disastrous consequences.

The first time after Elsie's arrival that one of these attacks occurred, she was greatly alarmed by the solemn bustle which prevailed; the long faces of her aunt and Parkins, Miss Maynard's agitation, the arrival of the doctor, and the whispered consultations behind doors.

'Is he *very* ill, Miss Maynard? Is he worse than usual?' she asked anxiously.

'I don't know,' said Miss Maynard sobbing, 'I am so nervous, your aunt *never* tells me.'

'Well, don't cry,' said Elsie kindly, 'I will try and find out. Very likely he'll be better to-morrow.'

She sallied forth accordingly in quest of information, and went cautiously into the passage which led to her uncle's room. As she did so, a door opened, and Parkins issued forth, carrying a plate with a mustard plaster on it. Elsie hastened up to her, 'How is the Gen——'

'Don't get in my way, please, miss'—and Parkins vanished through the green baize door.

'He must be very ill,' thought Elsie, too anxious about her uncle to be as angry at Parkins's rudeness as she would otherwise have been. She walked away absently, and next found herself in the dining-room, where Howell was laying the cloth.

'Do you know, miss, whether Mrs. Lindsay will dine this evening?' he inquired.

'I do not know, Howell; I am afraid General Lindsay is worse. Is this a *very* bad attack, do you know?'

Howell looked with half contemptuous pity at Elsie's white face and dilated eyes.

'There is no call to be alarmed, miss,' said he in a cheerful tone, arranging the glasses rapidly on the table. The General often 'as them, miss. He's something of an 'ippocondruck, *he* is.'

'Thank you, Howell,' said Elsie, and she went away, somewhat reassured, to console Miss Maynard as best she might.

General Lindsay appeared again in public the next day, looking a little whiter and more fragile, but otherwise much as usual, and Elsie was never quite so frightened again, though she now became consumed with curiosity as to the nature of her uncle's ailment. She applied first to Miss Maynard, although from her she did not expect to receive much information.

'What *is* the matter with him, Miss Maynard?' she asked. 'Is it his heart, or his liver, or what?'

'I never inquired, dear,' returned Miss Maynard, shrinking. 'I am so nervous in cases of illness, and your dear aunt is so ——'

'Easily made angry,' suggested Elsie.

'No—no, dear, reticent,' said Miss Maynard, 'reticent is the word.'

'You think her reticent,' said Elsie slowly. 'Now I should have thought her not reticent enough. However I'll ask her.'

Miss Maynard endeavoured to dissuade her pupil from this rash course, so Elsie decided to question Parkins first.

'By the bye, Parkins,' said she one day, affecting a lofty and careless air—'what is the nature of the General's attacks?'

'They are of a very severe nature, miss,' replied Parkins, primming up her mouth.

'Does he suffer much?' asked Elsie.

'Yes, miss, he suffers very much, and I do not like young ladies as inquires into things outside of their province,' was the snappish retort.

'It is not of the least consequence,' said Elsie, walking away with her head in the air, 'whether you like them or don't like them.'

It was not without great caution that Elsie addressed her aunt upon the subject ; but she was not prepared for the outburst of feeling which her innocent sounding question occasioned.

‘My dear,’ said Aunt Caroline, ‘how can *you* ask ? Your uncle has the *Lindsay* constitution.’

Elsie stood before her in silent consternation, whilst her aunt drew out a little pocket-handkerchief, and applied it rapidly to each eye in succession, at the same time shaking her other hand to and fro in the air.

‘Don’t take any notice,’ she gasped ; ‘I shall be better soon.’

Presently she put the handkerchief into her pocket again, and looked sternly at Elsie with her little black eyes. ‘You have distressed me, dear—distressed me ex—cessively,’ she said.

Elsie apologised for her indiscretion, and was forgiven ; but, after this conversation, she ceased to prosecute any further inquiries respecting her uncle’s mysteriously constituted system.

The Sundays at the Elms were the days on which Elsie really felt homesick ; a sort of solemn excitement then prevailed, which she particularly disliked, and Aunt Caroline assumed a peculiarly exalted and chastened demeanour. The church they attended was at some distance ; for although there was one close at hand, the views of the incumbent were not in accordance with those of Mrs. Lindsay, who, therefore, drove in state, in a closed carriage, to the village of Gravehurst, which was rather more than a mile distant, accompanied by as many of her household as could contrive to find room in the carriage.

The vicar of Gravehurst was the Reverend Ernest Maynard, a nephew of Miss Cecilia Maynard, and a connection of Mrs. Lindsay. He had not been long in this parish, and had formerly had a curacy in the east end of London. He had devoted himself to the work there with great earnestness and zeal, and it was with reluctance that he relinquished it for the country living which had been offered to him ; but his health having given way, he yielded

at last to the persuasions of his friends, and had now been settled at Gravehurst for nearly two years. He was a great favourite with Mrs. Lindsay, who considered him a most earnest and self-devoted young man ; but she found that even his views required a little alteration, which she never lost an opportunity of recommending to him. She was apt to complain that he was very stubborn in argument, as he was too conscientious to disguise his convictions in the smallest degree for the sake of making himself agreeable to any lady, however influential. Mrs. Lindsay had studied character to some purpose, however, and she could recognise and respect genuine merit, when it was not opposed to her strongest prejudices.

She was a thorough matchmaker, and, almost from the moment that Elsie came under her roof, she had decided that she had at last found the wife for Ernest Maynard. The pretty vicarage, with its snug rooms, its sunny garden, and its flowering shrubs and creepers, would be a fitting home for her fair young niece. United to Ernest, her character would develop into all that could be desired ; while, under Aunt Caroline's direct supervision, they would jointly become, as time went on, an ornament to the Church, a pattern to the neighbourhood, and a blessing to the nation at large. Animated by these hopes, Mrs. Lindsay lost no opportunity of bringing the young people together. Besides Mr. Maynard's occasional week-day visits, at which she always contrived that Elsie should be present, she used, after service on Sunday mornings, to linger at the vicarage until it was time to return home to dinner. Early dinner was one of the Sunday observances at the Elms, and helped to render the General's life a burden to him on that day.

On fine days this half hour at Gravehurst was usually spent in the garden, when Mrs. Lindsay would so arrange it that the vicar and Elsie should walk on in front, while she, hanging on the General's arm, viewed from a distance the objects of her benevolent designs.

Even as regarded mere outward appearance (thought she), how perfectly they suited one another ! Ernest Maynard, with his dark, thoughtful-looking countenance and

sweet and the bracken would be growing tall and thick. And in the evenings she would linger out until her father came and scolded her ; it seemed such a waste of time to go to bed, while a streak of light stayed all night in the northern sky.

‘I wish I had known then,’ she thought, ‘that I should be here now ; I should have enjoyed it even more—I would not have wasted a moment. And if anything good ever comes to me, I will remember, and enjoy it ; it would be such a pity if it were lost. And in the meantime, I am happy—really quite happy ; I might easily be worse off than I am now.’

CHAPTER IX.

' I will have hopes which cannot fade
For flowers the valley yields,
I will have humble thoughts, instead
Of silent, dewy fields ;
My spirit, and my God, shall be
My seaward hill, my boundless sea.'

By Elsie's arrangement Miss Maynard did come downstairs that very afternoon, and her recovery was soon complete.

Elsie had far more influence with her Aunt Caroline than she herself knew. She had never been accustomed to be contradicted or thwarted in small things, and this gave her manner a fearlessness and freedom before which Aunt Caroline gave way. Within certain limits, she came and went as she would, and she enjoyed an immunity from censure and supervision which surprised those who knew Mrs. Lindsay better. To the petty restrictions which were imposed upon her, Elsie submitted with gentle patience, however unreasonable they appeared to her. It was only common gratitude, she thought, to yield in small matters to one who treated her with so much affection. She had submitted to her father in his angry moods, less from timidity, or even filial reverence, than from her naturally gentle, peace-loving disposition, joined to a compassionate toleration for his infirmities of temper. Curiously enough, she associated Aunt Caroline with him in her mind, and considered that elderly people were often a little unreasonable, and must be humoured and made allowances for. For her Aunt Grizel she had a more genuine respect ; she placed a good deal of reliance on her judgment and good

sense, qualities which she did not credit her Aunt Caroline with possessing. Even to Aunt Grizel, however, she had never given her full confidence; she thought her too old to be startled by any new or unfamiliar ideas.

As time went on the life at the Elms grew very wearisome to Elsie, and she needed all her patience and self-control. Her occupations were all so different from what she had been used to; she took little interest in them, and found them petty and trivial. After her two hours of study, she was expected to remain in the drawing-room with some sort of needlework till luncheon time. Elsie rather disliked needlework of any sort, and entirely detested the kind which she had to do, which consisted chiefly of patchwork quilts for hospitals. It was not till the afternoon that she was able to breathe the fresh air which at Rossie she had almost lived in, never allowing any sort of weather to keep her in the house. After luncheon, the elder members of the party went for a drive; Elsie usually declined to accompany them, and was left free till their return, but there were scarcely any walks she could indulge in. Mrs. Lindsay did not like her to go to the river; she might not walk on the road for fear of tramps, nor on the streets, which were 'not respectable;' there was nothing left but the gravel drive, the garden, and the paddock, and with these Elsie was fain to content herself.

On Tuesday afternoons she went with Miss Maynard to a missionary working party, where they met most of their female acquaintances in the neighbourhood. These were not much to Elsie's taste, nor, indeed, to that of Aunt Caroline. The families at Chippingham were, as a rule, rather below Mrs. Lindsay in social standing; and though she enjoyed reigning like a queen in the midst of her little circle, she admitted no one to very great terms of intimacy. Occasionally, Elsie was taken to a garden party, or a picnic, but it was not an event of frequent occurrence. She had never had any girl friends, and at first she was interested, and curious to meet girls of her own age; but she found that she had almost no tastes in common with her new acquaintances, who, on their parts, thought her reserved

and proud. On her return from these social gatherings, she would seek the society of Hans, her first and only friend ; and, retiring with him to a corner of the sofa, would caress and talk to him, and tell him how beautiful he was, and how brave, and how elegant, with any other adjectives which occurred to her as appropriate.

Elsie was very sensitive to kindness, and, unused as she had been to meet with any demonstrations of affection, she was touched by those which her new friends lavished upon her, even though they began at times to be a little oppressive. The way in which all her time was arranged for her, and an account required of whatever she had been doing, became very irksome ; yet sometimes she found an extra half-hour in which she could slip down to the river, which had a peculiar charm for her. She had discovered a little nook amongst the willows, unseen from the house, where she could sit and watch the water, but the existence of this retreat she kept a secret. She had also one other resort. Nearly opposite the entrance gate, and a little way up the slope, a side road led to a large, new, red brick church. The ground about it had evidently been newly laid out, and was planted with minute shrubs of Portugal laurel, rhododendron, and holly. Elsie went up this road at first partly out of curiosity, partly because it seemed quiet, and finding that one of the church doors was always kept open, she went in. The quiet, and the soft subdued light attracted her, and after the first time she often went again. She would gladly have attended the daily five o'clock service, but as her aunt disapproved of the church, on account of the incumbent's views being, as she said, Ritualistic, Elsie did not like to distress her by doing so frequently. She went, however, whenever she could do so without attracting much attention, not from a preference for any forms in particular, but because the service and the beautiful music soothed her, and lifted her above all the petty worries and annoyances at home.

This week-day church-going was a part of Elsie's conduct which was totally incomprehensible to her aunt, although Mrs. Lindsay did not like absolutely to forbid it.

If Elsie liked going to All Saint's Church on ordinary days, and even sometimes when there was no service going on, how much more, one would think, ought she to be delighted and edified by the ministrations of Mr. Maynard, both in church and at home! Yet these privileges never seemed to afford this strange girl the smallest gratification.

Ernest too, on his part, did not betray by his manner that peculiarly ardent affection for this young member of his flock, which Mrs. Lindsay was certain he must inwardly feel. The apparent insensibility of both was, to say the least of it, very disheartening; but Mrs. Lindsay kept all misgivings to herself; confiding to the General her hopes, but not her fears.

'Poor dear young man!' she said, hastening to her husband's room one day, after Mr. Maynard had left the house,—'there can be no doubt where *his* affections are placed!'

'Eh?' said the General—'where's that?'

'Dearest Henry! you know whom I mean. I only hope our darling will appreciate his full worth.'

'Oh—ah! yes. Maynard, to be sure. You were going to marry him to one of the Dales, weren't you?'

'I allude, of course, to your own niece,' said Mrs. Lindsay sharply.

The General fidgeted and looked uncomfortable.

'Little Elsie?' he said deprecatingly. 'Pretty girl, Elsie. Too pretty for a parson, eh?'

The General's marked preference for pretty girls, and indifference at least, if not aversion, to the clergy, were a source of great distress to his wife. She was sorry she had mentioned the matter to him at all, the more so, as he lost no time in remonstrating with his niece on the subject.

'Well, Miss Elsie!' he began, 'what's this I hear? Caught the parson, eh?'

'I?' said Elsie, colouring indignantly. 'What do you mean, Uncle Henry?'

The General was about to explain himself at length, but Mrs. Lindsay looked up sternly from her writing, and sharply tapped the table with a pencil. 'Henry!' said

she—‘silence! Silence, Henry!’ and the General was quenched.

This little conversation had more effect in furthering Mrs. Lindsay’s wishes than all her previous efforts. The next time Mr Maynard called, Elsie absented herself, and during the following Sunday’s walk her manner was cold and distant. This naturally caused Mr. Maynard to wonder what was the matter with her, and after a course of self-examination, he discovered that it was her presence which made the Elms so attractive to him, and that his Sunday walk in the garden would lose all its charm if she were not by his side.

This discovery startled and disturbed him not a little. He had had some thoughts, now that his health was re-established, of returning to his London work amongst the poor and outcast, and he was shocked to find himself becoming comparatively indifferent to their miseries, and turning his thoughts towards a life of worldly ease and happiness.

After a week or two Elsie, having forgotten her uncle’s speech or attaching little importance to it, returned to her former manner, with perhaps a touch of additional kindness, as she saw Mr. Maynard so evidently depressed and harassed; and Mrs. Lindsay observed this state of things with growing satisfaction. At length Ernest, tempted as it were on all sides, determined to try what absence and a visit to the scene of his former labours would do towards effacing this new image from his mind.

One hot day in the beginning of July he walked to the Elms to inform the ladies there of his intended absence, and to bid them good-bye for a time. He found Mrs. Lindsay alone, Miss Maynard and Elsie being in the garden engaged in their botanical studies.

Mrs. Lindsay heard of Ernest’s intended departure with much surprise, not unmixed with indignation, and expressed her disapproval in her usual emphatic manner.

‘Going to London for a month! My dear Ernest, what—in—the—world can have prompted such a step?’

‘You know, my kind friend, that I have always intended

returning there ultimately, and I have lately been led to fear lest a life of ease should lead to mere self-pleasing, and should weaken this purpose in my mind.'

'Now, now, Ernest,' said Mrs. Lindsay, nodding her head, 'don't you be self-opinionated. You know very well what I have always thought of this foolish, and self-conceited, and inconsiderate scheme of yours. I do not approve of it in any shape or in any way. It may be all very well for those whose systems are so constructed as to withstand the anxieties, and the fatigues, and the——'

'Forgive me for interrupting you, but I have considered the matter well. I have already provided myself with a substitute for a month only, and you know I have settled nothing finally.'

'You cannot deceive *me*, Ernest. There is something which you are concealing from me.'

As she said this with extreme sternness, Mrs. Lindsay pointed her forefinger in the direction of Mr. Maynard's waistcoat, as if to indicate that she knew the exact spot where the object alluded to was secreted. Ernest felt his colour rising beneath her scrutiny—he stammered and hesitated. 'I will tell you all, Mrs. Lindsay, when I return—in the meantime——' He rose and looked about for his hat.

'If you wish to acquaint your Aunt Cecilia with your resolution,' said Mrs. Lindsay, coldly but impressively, 'you will find her—with my niece—in the garden. And tell your aunt, if you please, that I should wish to speak to her. Now go—and beware, Ernest, how you trifle with your own heart.'

Mr. Maynard, though a brave man, was only too thankful to escape. Mrs. Lindsay's last words had raised a tumult of feelings within him, and before joining the two ladies he paused a few moments to collect his thoughts. At the bottom of the garden was a small pond with a seat in front of it. There he caught sight of Elsie's pale blue cotton gown, and, on approaching, found her and Miss Maynard intently examining some duck-weed through a magnifying glass.

'I have been commissioned by Mrs. Lindsay to find you, my dear aunt,' he began.

Miss Maynard jumped up in a nervous flutter at the message and her nephew's unexpected appearance.

'Does she wish to see me?'

'She wishes to speak to you presently, but I was about to tell you——' He was unable to finish his sentence, for Miss Maynard was already on her way to the house. She had been frequently warned by Mrs. Lindsay never to make a third in any possible serious conversation between Mr. Maynard and Elsie; and she forgot everything else in her anxiety to carry out these instructions to the letter.

Elsie laid aside her duck-weed rather reluctantly, and made some trivial remark which Mr. Maynard scarcely seemed to hear; he looked anxious and disturbed.

'Miss Ross,' said he abruptly, 'I came to say good-bye to you and to my aunt, as I am leaving Gravehurst.'

'Are you, Mr. Maynard?' said Elsie, much surprised; 'not for altogether?'

'By no means. I hope to return in a month. Circumstances have made it desirable that I should leave home for a short time for change, and I intend revisiting my old parish in the east end of London.'

'You have not been well? But I should not have thought London a good place to go to for change. Won't you be very hot? Not that I do not think a change a good thing—an excellent thing,' said Elsie emphatically, by no means wishing to hinder Mr. Maynard's departure, which would be a certain relief to her, yet disinterestedly anxious for his welfare.

'I am not ill,' he replied, 'and my personal feelings are of little consequence. I have with difficulty prevailed upon my friend, Mr. Talmud Brooks, to exchange with me. He will doubtless be greatly invigorated by country air, while I——' He paused.

'That,' said Elsie approvingly, 'is a good action. I hope you will not suffer from it in any way, and I am sure it will do your friend good. It is very hot, even here,' she added, rather languidly.

‘Miss Ross,’ said Ernest presently, ‘you told me the other day when I asked you that you found your life here somewhat empty and hollow. Have you still that feeling?’

‘I did not mean to complain of my life here,’ said Elsie hastily. ‘I am very—very—comfortable, you know, and every one is as kind to me as possible. It is very different from home, of course, but I should be most ungrateful if I complained.’

‘Then you no longer find your life hollow?’

Elsie had tilted her hat back and was gazing meditatively at the sky; she now set it straight, and looked at Mr. Maynard.

‘Indeed, I do,’ she said with decision. ‘I find it getting hollower and hollower.’

Mr. Maynard appeared deeply pained.

‘There must be a fault somewhere,’ he said. ‘Have you ever attempted any parish work—such as district visiting?’

‘I have thought of that,’ said Elsie; ‘for so many of the ladies here do a great deal, and I would have gone to see some of the poor people, but then you see we are not in *your* parish, and Aunt Caroline does not approve of Mr. Broadway’s poor, or Mr. Mounteagle’s either, and my uncle thinks I might catch diseases and bring them home. You know it does not do to annoy my uncle and aunt; it makes them ill; so it really does not seem as if work amongst the poor were the duty appointed for me.’

Elsie’s face was so young and childish as she gravely looked up at him for advice, that Mr. Maynard felt that to speak his wishes then would be premature as well as weak; but he scarcely felt in a mood to give her pastoral counsel as to her duties.

‘I will send you a little book of mine,’ he said, ‘if you will accept it. It is entitled *Reassuring Remarks, spoken at Random*. I must leave you now.’

‘Won’t you come in?’ said Elsie. ‘Miss Maynard will be vexed not to see you again before you go.’

But Ernest, not daring to risk another encounter with Mrs. Lindsay, made a hasty excuse and departed.

Elsie watched him as with long hurried strides he reached the little garden door and, passing through it, disappeared.

'He is a good man, I do think,' she said to herself. 'I would really like him quite well if Aunt Caroline did not worry me so about him. But, oh dear! he is dull—or is it I who am dull? He always answers me as if he did not understand, or thought me a fool; but then so do all the people hereabouts. I am of a different sort somehow;' and Elsie sighed.

'I am not going to begin and think about my trials, though; I am here, and I must just stay here, and there is no use in making a fuss. If I were at home I should have a large trial in the shape of Euphemia, probably worse than any here. Come along, little Hans! I know you miss the rabbits too, but we must be resigned, and not wish for what we cannot get. Perhaps if we behave very well, we may have some parish work given us, and is not that more ennobling than hunting rabbits?'

So saying, Elsie went slowly towards the house, and presently caught sight of Mrs. Lindsay tapping the window and beckoning from within.

'What are you about, child?' said she irritably as Elsie entered, 'remaining out so long in the heat and glare?'

'Oh, I like the heat, Aunt Caroline,' said Elsie cheerfully, 'as long as I don't have to work. Mr. Maynard is going to London—he told you so, did he not? He was sorry he had not time to come in again.'

'Oh, I know where he is going,' said Mrs. Lindsay—with a peculiar intonation, as who should say: 'I knew all about that, and a good deal more, long before *you* came into the world;'—'and *he* knows what I think of the scheme! Ah, self, self! how it blinds our eyes!'

'I thought it nice of Mr. Maynard to go,' said Elsie, much puzzled. 'Why do you think it selfish, Aunt Caroline? He merely wishes to cool his friend. Surely no one would go to the east end of London out of selfishness.'

'What did he say to you, child?' asked Mrs. Lindsay,

rather mollified by this warm defence of Mr. Maynard, and looking curiously at her niece. Elsie seated herself, took her hat off, and considered.

'He said—that circumstances had made him wish to go to London for a month, and that his friend was coming to Gravehurst, as he needed change of air. And he asked me if I ever did parish work, and when I said I did not, he promised to send me a book called *Obscure Observations*, or some name like that, and—that was about all, I think, except that he hoped you would excuse his coming in.'

Mrs. Lindsay was dissatisfied, but it was impossible to doubt that Elsie had faithfully reported the substance of the conversation.

'*Obscure Observations*, child!'—this with increased irritation—'when will you learn to arrange, and properly to express, your ideas? How can that be the title of a book?'

'No more it is, Aunt Caroline,' said Elsie, laughing a little; 'I forget the name, but really it was something very nearly as funny.'

The hot weather was succeeded by several days of constant thunderstorms, which produced, indoors as well as out, what Elsie mentally termed 'an atmosphere.' Mrs. Lindsay was irritable and 'tried,' Miss Maynard depressed and tearful; while the General, who was always in the greatest force when other people were ill or out of spirits, often unconsciously stirred up strife by his cheerful but inapposite remarks. The rain confined everybody to the house, and even the dogs shared in the general discomfort, which Bijou, in particular, greatly added to, as want of exercise always disagreed with him.

Elsie was therefore agreeably surprised one morning at finding Aunt Caroline radiant, and full of mildness and benignity. A letter from the General's grandnephew, David Lindsay, offering an immediate visit, had been the cause of this happy change. The moment breakfast was over Mrs. Lindsay bustled away to make preparations, which were to be on a scale of splendour proportioned to

such an event as the arrival of their 'Indian hero,' for so Aunt Caroline termed him. Elsie begged for a history of his exploits, but being unable to ascertain from her uncle that the young warrior had ever seen actual service, or distinguished himself in any way, she was disposed to be somewhat contemptuous of all the commotion made in his honour. The excitement of the mistress was fully shared in by the domestics, to judge by the bustle which prevailed on the stairs,—housemaids running hither and thither, and Parkins reigning as viceroy in the guest-chamber, arranging and dictating.

After luncheon Mrs. Lindsay issued her final orders for the ensuing day, when the guest was expected to arrive.

'This, my love,' said she to Elsie, 'is the key of the china closet. Will you assist Parkins in bringing out the best dinner-service for to-morrow's use, as Howell, with William and Herbert, are already fully occupied in polishing the plate? I need not tell you, dear, that the flowers in the drawing-room must be freshly arranged—that you always do very nicely.'

Elsie readily undertook these duties, glad of anything which pleased and amused her aunt; whilst the latter busied her brain in picturing to herself how the arrival might be rendered most effective. The whole household, arrayed in their best, should line the entrance-hall, while a brass band playing martial airs outside might be a pleasing addition; but this last suggestion was overruled by Trotter, the coachman, lest the horses should be startled.

A sad end, however, was put to all these preparations. The next day, just as the decoration of the drawing-room was completed, a telegram was brought in and handed to Mrs. Lindsay. She took up the yellow envelope, and dropped it as if it were a burning coal. 'Those dreadful telegrams!' she gasped. 'I *cannot* open it.'

Elsie picked it up. 'Open it, Aunt Caroline,' she said cheerily, 'it may be nothing.'

Thus encouraged, Mrs. Lindsay at length tore open the missive, which proved to be from David Lindsay, from

London. 'Detained here by business—very sorry—hope to come to-morrow—will let you know.'

Mrs. Lindsay sank back in her chair panting.

'Oh dear, dear!' wailed Miss Maynard. 'After all our anticipations!'

'Tiresome creature!' said Elsie indignantly. 'I have no patience with him!'

'Hush!' said Mrs. Lindsay, raising herself. 'Control yourself, Cecilia!—Do not give way to temper, dear'—to Elsie. She sat upright, and looked around her with an air of lofty composure. 'Take away that bowl of roses,' she said presently; 'the perfume is overpowering. Cecilia, be kind enough to ring the bell.'

There was silence till Herbert appeared.

'Tell Howell,' said Mrs. Lindsay, 'that we shall *not* require the best china this evening. We shall *NOT* require it.'

When Herbert withdrew she rose majestically. 'I must go to my husband,' said she. 'Employ yourselves, my dears.'

Throughout the day Mrs. Lindsay maintained the heroic fortitude which had distinguished her conduct in the morning; the very unexpectedness of the shock brought with it an excitement which upheld her. During dinner, and while the General was in the room, she conversed upon every-day topics with studied cheerfulness; at other times she was impressively silent, only speaking when she saw occasion to enforce some moral lesson upon her hearers. The next day passed in much the same manner, all mention of a possible visitor being avoided. Elsie asked, indeed, when she came downstairs in the morning whether Mr. Lindsay were coming, but her aunt merely waved her away with a shake of the head and a sweet smile of resignation, and after luncheon the party, with the exception of Elsie, set out for their usual afternoon drive.

CHAPTER X.

‘ . . . Wot’s a beauty?—the flower as blows.
But proputt’y, proputt’y sticks, an’ proputt’y, proputt’y grows.’

IN one of the midland counties, amidst fine pasture land and timber, stands a large and handsome house called Alkerton Priory. This property had been for some time in the market, and had only been taken possession of since Ladyday by its new owner, Mr. Fitzgerald. It was an old house, built of the rich-coloured yellow stone peculiar to the district; its stately front looked down upon green meadows, with groups of elm and oak trees, stretching away as far as the eye could reach, until they melted into the sky, and the wooded distance faded into a soft blue mist.

In front a sluggish river crept winding through the meadows, its course almost hidden by the thick grass. Only one dark spot was to be seen upon the landscape, where a group of yew trees cast their shadow, near a pond where white water-lilies grew, and on which a pair of swans were sailing. The garden was laid out in terraces, and there a number of peacocks were walking up and down, displaying their splendid plumage. The hot July sun poured down upon the mellow-tinted walls of the house, against which pink roses bloomed in rich clusters. But within all was cool, with the fragrant coolness of an old country house in summer time. The hour was about ten o’clock, and three people were at breakfast in the oak panelled dining-room. Places had been laid for four, but one was empty, and a well-filled tray had just been carried out by the butler, the delicacies with which it was

heaped showing that, whatever might be the nature of the invalid's complaint, loss of appetite was not one of its symptoms.

Lady Eleanor Fitzgerald, who presided at the head of the table, had finished her breakfast, and was reading some papers with a discontented air. David Lindsay, her eldest son, was standing at the window, trying to tempt the peacocks with bits of bread, while Lionel, the younger, having helped himself to a slice of melon at the side table, proceeded, after a pause of thoughtful consideration, to empty the contents of the cream-jug over it, and to eat it, slowly and critically, yet not without some appearance of approbation.

'Well, mother, any news?' asked David, throwing his last piece of bread at a sparrow, as the peacocks remained insensible to his blandishments.

'A letter from Caroline Lindsay,' replied his mother. 'No news. I wish you would offer a visit there, David. They want you to come, but they don't know when you are disengaged. Lionel, dear boy, you will make yourself so ill. Who ever heard of eating cream with melon?'

'Ill!' returned Lionel with scorn. 'I wish there was anything to get ill upon. Cream, indeed! I don't even call it milk. In Devonshire we had at least cream if we had nothing else.'

'It is poor here,' said Lady Eleanor, looking sadly at the empty cream-jug. 'I detest the midland counties myself, but as it is dear Frederick's fancy I give way to it. I have sacrificed myself to my family all my life.'

Her sons exchanged glances expressive of some surprise at this statement, and Lady Eleanor resumed the perusal of her letter.

'Yes, David,' she said when she had finished, 'I think you should certainly go. The old General seems to be failing a good deal. Listen to what she says. "We are much interested in the mission for Ping-Yang"—that's not it—let me see—"a truly sweet and attractive young person,"—it must be on the other sheet. Oh! here it is. "My darling husband has recently been prostrated by two

of his distressing attacks, one following the other, which have greatly reduced his strength.”

‘What’s that about an attractive young person?’ asked David, who appeared to have been more interested in the former paragraph.

‘Oh, nothing at all. Some girl she has living with her,’ said Lady Eleanor impatiently. ‘But really, David, you ought to go and see the poor old man who has always been so fond of you. It would be a real kindness.’

And who knows, said Lionel, rising from the table as he spoke, ‘that the old boy might not come down handsome in his will?’

‘Peace with thy scurrilous jests,’ said David. ‘Well, mother, I don’t mind if I do proffer myself as a guest at the Elms for a short time, particularly as there is a young lady there possessed of so many charms. I should like to hear about her.’

‘Nonsense, David! I do wish you would not make yourself ridiculous. This is a girl she seems to have adopted, and of course she will rave about her. Elsie Ross is her name; she comes from Scotland. There is nothing particular about her.’

David assumed a meditative air. ‘If you seriously think, mother, that she is *not* attractive,’ said he slowly, ‘it might be best, all things considered, not to go there at present.’

‘Then, David, it is very selfish and wrong of you, quite wrong I call it, to neglect a clear duty. Supposing the old man were to die—he might go off at any time in one of these attacks—you would reproach yourself all your life long.’

‘He would indeed,’ put in Lionel solemnly.

‘And this girl has no claim upon him whatever. I don’t suppose she will have a penny. She may be pretty; I daresay she is. Her mother was a sweet creature, and so distinguished looking; she was a cousin of your poor father’s. But she chose to go and bury herself at some little Scotch farm——’

‘And she’s dead—is she?’ asked David.

'*Oh yes ! years and years ago. And this girl, brought up amongst boors and——*'

'*Bullocks?*' suggested Lionel.

'*What sort of manners can you expect her to have ! But all Caroline Lindsay's geese are swans.*'

With these words, intended to arm David against the snares of beauty unaccompanied by merit (or wealth, which is the same thing), Lady Eleanor sailed away, followed presently by her two sons.

The brothers were a marked contrast to each other. Both were handsome ; David, the elder by nearly five years, was tall, bronzed, and active looking, with bright blue eyes and a pleasant smile. He had not long since returned from India on leave from his regiment, and having been absent from home for three years, everything was new to him, and he was disposed to be amused and pleased by all that went on around him. He was naturally of a cheerful, buoyant disposition, and owing to this, perhaps, and his good health, he had got through life so far easily and pleasantly, and had never given his mother the least uneasiness ; whereas Lionel, with his delicate health and wayward temper, had been a perpetual source of anxiety and disappointment. Yet it was on Lionel that by far the most of her motherly affection was expended. He resembled her very closely in features ; he had been a beautiful child, and was now a handsome lad of eighteen, with large liquid brown eyes, straight features, and masses of rich dark curly hair, which he wore too long to suit David's soldierly ideas. But the chief unlikeness to his brother consisted in the listlessness and languor of his whole manner. Every turn and movement betokened that indolence which was the chief characteristic of the spoilt boy. As he had been thought too delicate to go to a public school, he had been sent to one private tutor after another, learning as little as he chose from each, and leaving as soon as he got tired of his surroundings. And now he was reading to enter Oxford, spending two hours of each day with Mr. Blandford, a neighbouring clergyman, who had undertaken to coach him.

The only study, however, which seemed to rouse him to

a real interest, was that of music, for which he had an uncommon taste and talent. He had now almost outgrown his boyish delicacy, and David's prospects were at present the objects of his mother's chief concern.

For Lady Eleanor had long since planned both her sons' future lives for them, which she felt herself perfectly competent to do, having all her life succeeded in getting her own way somehow. David, who was the heir to Ardvoira, a small West Highland property, and had distant expectations of a Scotch peerage, would not be at all well off, and 'must marry money,' while Lionel, who, she was resolved, should be his stepfather's heir, could afford to marry whom he pleased, subject of course to her approval.

The two brothers strolled out together, and the family did not meet again till luncheon, at which meal Mr. Fitzgerald assisted.

Lady Eleanor's second husband was Irish by birth, though he had never visited his native country since his childhood. His father had been a merchant in Liverpool, and from him Mr. Fitzgerald had inherited a large fortune.

He was a quiet-looking man, with a particularly soft voice and mild deportment, and was entirely thrown into the shade by his handsome and stately wife. No one, to judge by his appearance and manner, would believe that he had quarrelled with all his neighbours in Devonshire, and had not a single relation of his own with whom he was on speaking terms. He was, however, a kind and affectionate husband, and was upon the whole very indulgent to his stepsons, though he had some peculiarities of temper, and was excessively fanciful about his health.

'Do you feel equal to a drive this afternoon, Frederick?' inquired Lady Eleanor.

'A drive, my dear Eleanor? You forget that none of the horses are fit to go out at present.'

Mr. Fitzgerald kept very fine horses, which he was apt to consider too delicate and expensive to be used.

'They never are fit to go out, it seems to me,' said Lady Eleanor. 'I suppose you keep them for the grooms to ride.'

'You must take the pony carriage to-day if you wish to drive,' said Mr. Fitzgerald. 'The roan mare could go, I daresay. And do pray, Eleanor, go and call upon the Freemans; they are our nearest neighbours, and you have never yet returned their visit.'

'Well; if you will drive me——' began his wife.

'I fear I am quite unequal to the exertion. You, David—or Lionel, can drive your mother.'

'It would do you all the good in the world to go out,' said Lady Eleanor, displeased. 'And I see no occasion to call upon the Freemans.'

'Mr. Freeman is an excellent man,' said Mr. Fitzgerald, who had never seen him. 'I esteem and respect him highly.'

'He is a true-born Briton,' observed Lionel, 'one of that noble Saxon race whose soul ever disdained a foreign yoke.'

'How do you know that, Lionel?' asked David.

'He said so himself, and he ought to know,' replied Lionel. 'I have been reading his speech at the county meetings, and so apparently has papa. You ought certainly to cultivate their acquaintance, mother.'

'How am I to call upon them?' said Lady Eleanor. 'Nobody can get in at their gate.'

'That big gate does not open,' said David. 'Most of the entrance-gates hereabouts are constructed on principles which prevent their ever opening. You go in at a little side door.'

'They are Anglo-Saxon gates,' explained Lionel, 'and were erected to resist William the Conqueror.'

'Which of you two is going to drive me?' inquired their mother, who had now no intention of letting them off.

'You will find David exactly adapted for the office, mother. He knows all about Anglo-Saxon gateways, you see. You take her, David, like a good fellow.'

David made no objection. He was the one of the family who generally did any little duty which the others found too irksome, and the pony carriage was ordered forthwith.

CHAPTER XI.

'We have no title-deeds to house or lands ;
Owners and occupants of earlier dates
From graves forgotten stretch their dusty hands,
And hold in mortmain still their old estates.'

BULCOTE MANOR, the residence of the Freemans, was distant from the Priory about three miles by the road. There was a short cut to it across the meadows, which in summer formed a very pleasant walk ; but as there were two stiles to be got over, besides having to cross the river by a plank, Lady Eleanor found it easier, as well as more dignified, to drive on the occasion of this her first visit.

Their way led along a pretty road, bordered by tall trees, but as these had been lopped of their lower branches, they did not afford much shade from the baking sun. The roan mare tossed her head and switched her tail incessantly as they jogged along, trying to free herself from the flies which kept settling on her in black clusters.

'Really this stifling heat is unendurable,' said Lady Eleanor, putting up her parasol. 'What must it be in London ! The girls will be glad to get into the country, I daresay.'

'What girls ?' asked David.

'The Mortimer girls—your cousins. I expect them here next week. Your aunt writes that Constance is quite worn out.'

'To be sure,' said David, 'I forgot. Are they all grown up now ? I remember Rosamond and Constance, and a little one.'

'Blanche—oh yes ! she was presented this year. She

is a fine-looking girl, but none of them are half as pretty as poor Rose.'

'Is Rose coming too?'

'No, she is going home. I suppose she does not exactly like to leave that husband of hers any longer. Poor thing! what a mistake that marriage was.'

'If she chose to marry that ruffian,' said David with some severity, 'I do not see why she is to be pitied, if it turned out a mistake.'

'Not to be pitied!' exclaimed his mother. 'How could she know he would go mad, and have to be shut up?'

'If he's shut up, why does she not want to leave him?'

'You are dreadfully matter-of-fact, dear David,' said Lady Eleanor impatiently. 'He is not shut up always—only when he is violent. Though I think it a very great pity she ever lets him out. I consider your uncle and aunt very much to blame,' she continued, 'first to make her marry the man, when they knew what his character was, and now they take no steps to have him put under proper restraint.'

'Did she not marry him of her own free will then?'

'My dear boy, you need not look so fierce! I don't suppose she was in love with him—but everybody thought it such a good match—and so it was, if he could only have kept sober. It was quite against *my* advice though, I am glad to say.'

David said nothing, but his face grew so dark that his mother was puzzled.

'Can he have cared for Rose?' she thought. 'Impossible though—he was such a mere boy.'

She would have liked to question him, but scarcely dared to do so at that moment; David's unusually stern expression almost frightened her, and the next turn of the road brought them in sight of Bulcote Manor.

It was a picturesque-looking house, with irregular gables, and high, narrow latticed windows; it was built of the same yellow stone as Alkerton Priory, and was probably of still older date. No creepers grew upon its walls, but lichens, gray and yellow and white, made its tone still more

subdued. The red-tiled roof had become a purple brown from age, almost crimson in places, and stained here and there with patches of golden lichen.

The narrow road up which they had last turned led them past the front of the house, where was a square grass plot, or green court, as it was called, surrounded by high hedges of yew and privet. Just in front frowned the gate which had formed the subject of discussion at luncheon, and from which no drive led to the house, but the green turf grew close up to the gate. There were no flowers, indeed there they would have seemed almost out of place ; all was cool, green, and quiet. A few paces farther on, half hidden by the bushes, there was an opening just wide enough to admit a carriage ; it led past the house to the stables and outhouses at the back, while at the side a small green door in the yew hedge gave admittance by a flagged path, leading through the green court into the house.

'Now David,' said Lady Eleanor in a tone of triumph, as they came to the fast shut gate, 'how are we going to get in? This is exactly what I told Frederick, but no one attends to what I say.'

'It is all right,' replied David, 'it is not meant to be opened. See, here is where we drive up.'

'I will not drive up there,' said Lady Eleanor. 'Nothing shall induce me—a most dangerous turn. Stop, David, I desire you. I insist upon your opening that gate.'

David endeavoured to remonstrate, but in vain. Lady Eleanor was rather nervous in a carriage ; the roan mare began to fidget and to back, and the corner was really a little awkward to turn.

'David, I shall get out.'

She was actually on the point of doing so, and David pulled up.

'Do let me drive you to the door quietly,' he said, much annoyed. 'It isn't respectable to stand here wrangling before the people's windows.'

'I will not,' said Lady Eleanor, getting out, and regaining her dignity as she reached *terra firma*, 'I shall sit here until that gate is opened.'

'Very good,' replied David, who was now thoroughly out of temper, 'you will sit some time then.'

So saying, he was about to drive on, when he again received an unexpected check. A small, freckled boy, panting and very hot, burst suddenly through the hedge on the right-hand side of the road, startling the mare so much that she stood straight up on her hind legs, and remained for some seconds in that attitude.

'Papa sent me,' gasped the boy breathlessly. 'We are all making hay in the Bury Ham. If you're callers, you're to come there.'

'We *are* callers,' David responded meekly, 'but what and where, my young friend, is the Bury Ham?'

'Down there,' said the boy, pointing, and at the same moment a lady hurried up to them exclaiming—

'Oh dear! I was afraid there had been an accident. I hope no one is hurt.'

Lady Eleanor had by this time recovered from her alarm. 'Thank you, not at all,' said she graciously, shaking hands with Mrs. Freeman. 'My son,' darting a revengeful glance at David, 'did not understand your entrance. But you are busy, and we are interrupting you—David—'

'Pray do not go,' said Mrs. Freeman eagerly. She was a fair, faded woman, with rather a harassed expression of face, and a high-pitched, plaintive voice.

'If your son will drive round, my little boy will show him the way. Oh! here is my husband. John, Lady Eleanor Fitzgerald is here, and——'

'Glad to see you, my lady,' said Mr. Freeman. 'Glad to see you too, young sir. Tommy! take that horse round to the stables.'

David and Tommy drove off together, and Mr. Freeman once more addressed himself to Lady Eleanor.

'You couldn't have come at a better time,' said he heartily. 'You'll see us all making hay; I allow no idle hands here, I can tell you. This way, my lady, come along.'

'No, John,' said Mrs. Freeman, 'Lady Eleanor would rather come indoors.'

'What! and lose the sight of the hay-making?' exclaimed Mr. Freeman. 'I tell you, we're all there, down to the very sucking infant. Lady Eleanor never saw anything like it in her life, I'll be bound.'

'I shall be charmed to see it,' said Lady Eleanor coldly, 'I delight in the country, and in farming;' and the party proceeded to the Bury Ham.

This was a large meadow, which lay to the right of the house, sloping down to the river, and presented a bright and busy scene, as every one upon the farm had turned out to help in tossing the hay.

All the young Freemans, too, were there, eleven in number; Edith, the eldest, holding the above-mentioned infant, while the intermediate ones were busy with forks, suited to their various sizes.

'Now, youngsters!' said the Squire, 'work with a will, all of you. Here's Lady Eleanor Fitzgerald come to look on. She doesn't see a sight like this in her fine London houses.' And Mr. Freeman set to work himself with great vigour.

He was a burly middle-aged man, with sandy hair, and a face rather like a bull-dog's, at present very red with his exertions. He was in his shirt-sleeves, and wore a broad straw hat.

Mrs. Freeman made room for Lady Eleanor on a bundle of hay by her side. Miss Edith, who was just grown up, and anxious that everybody should be aware of this fact, resigned the baby to her mother, and seated herself near them, lest perchance she should be confounded with her two next sisters, Bessie and Polly, who were still in the schoolroom. But Miss Goodenough, the governess, although a lady of a certain age, having instructed Mrs. Freeman when she was a girl, did not disdain to toss the hay, or rather to sprinkle it about in a ladylike manner.

David, with Tommy Freeman, now appeared, and were at once pressed into the service.

David took off his coat and set to work vigorously, whereupon Miss Edith, resuming her fork, recommenced her labours with an industry edifying to behold.

Lady Eleanor began to wonder how long this state of

things would continue. Mrs. Freeman, whose stock of conversation was getting exhausted, at last inquired if she disliked the strong scent of the hay.

'I think it charming,' said Lady Eleanor, 'quite charming;' and she surveyed the scene languidly.

'You do not find it too warm? Shall we not come into the house and have some tea?'

Lady Eleanor again glanced at David, but seeing that he showed not the faintest sign of leaving off, she answered, 'Thank you, Mrs. Freeman—if you are going in. The fact is'—rising and shaking the hayseeds from her dress—'I have been stung by a gnat. I am a martyr, a perfect martyr to insects.'

Mrs. Freeman handed the baby to her daughter Bessie, bidding her find the nurse, and then led the way into the house.

'We are paying you a regular visitation, Mrs. Freeman,' said Lady Eleanor. 'I do not know when that boy of mine will be able to tear himself away.'

'It is particularly pleasant that you are here to-day, Lady Eleanor. Our neighbours at Alkerton used often to come and spend the day with us at hay-making time. My husband is so fond of keeping up old English customs; he never will have a machine to toss the hay.'

Lady Eleanor answered that old customs were exceedingly delightful, and Mrs. Freeman continued—

'Yes, there was always a strong friendship kept up between Alkerton and Bulcote, although latterly we saw little of the poor old Squire. Poor Mr. Popham! he was quite broken down by his son's death, but in his good days he used to tell the story of how, when his father went out riding, with his wife on a pillion behind him, on one occasion they fell into a ditch, but were taken out, and dried at the hospitable mansion of the Freemans.'

'Perhaps you thought something of that sort had happened when we arrived,' said Lady Eleanor, whose wrath against David was in no way diminished by this narrative. 'Oh, this is the entrance. What a charming old place!' she added with genuine admiration as they walked up the flagged path through the green court.

'Do you think so?' said Mrs. Freeman. 'I should have liked some flowers, but——'

'Oh no!' said Lady Eleanor, 'it is perfect as it is. So picturesque—so thoroughly in keeping!'

She paused to look round her before going into the house. Mrs. Freeman pushed open the door, and they went into the hall. This was a large room, paved with stone, and having a wide and deep fireplace at one side; it contained no furniture except a long oaken table, a sideboard, and some chairs.

'This is where we dine,' said Mrs. Freeman. 'There are so many of us, you see. My husband likes to have early dinner, with all his children round him.'

Lady Eleanor shuddered. 'You are fortunate, Mrs. Freeman,' said she, 'in having all your children still with you. We mothers are seldom able to keep our sons long. Have you a tutor for your boys?'

'No, they attend the grammar-school at Wroxbury daily. Mr. Bacon, the master, is an excellent man, and it is not far off. My husband likes to have all his children under his own eye. To-day they have a holiday for the hay-making; my husband thinks they ought to be trained to be useful. But I will ring for tea.'

She opened a door which led out of the hall into a little parlour, and rang the bell. 'This is our sitting-room,' said she.

Lady Eleanor glanced round. The furniture was scanty and rather the worse for wear; the carpet was threadbare, particularly in one part, which had been used by the lesser children as a race-course, and on the doors the paint had been kicked off as high up as the handles.

'The door on the other side of the hall leads into the book-room,' said Mrs. Freeman. 'Should you care to see it?'

Her visitor assented, and they crossed the hall. The book-room corresponded in size to the parlour, and, except that the walls were lined with old books, presented much the same appearance.

'There are some valuable books here,' said Mrs. Freeman. 'My husband is justly proud of his library, although

he does not care to open a book himself ; and I have not much time for reading.'

Here a tottering step was heard, and Mrs. Freeman went hastily into the hall, where an old gray-headed manservant was seen slowly making his way to the parlour door.

'Blencowe,' said Mrs. Freeman, speaking very loud and distinctly, bring tea into the parlour. '*Tea*, Blencowe.'

The old man turned slowly round, and scratched his head doubtfully. '*Tea?*' said he after a short pause.

'Yes,' said Mrs. Freeman. '*Tea*, and bread, and butter, and cake.'

'*Cake?*' repeated Blencowe, looking as if this last was almost more than he could bear; but seeing that his mistress was not likely to be turned from her desperate resolve, he departed muttering to himself. The two ladies then went into the parlour, and after a considerable lapse of time, Blencowe returned empty handed. He went into a corner of the room, and after much apparent exertion, at last succeeded in bringing forward a small three-legged table, which he placed before his mistress' chair. He then proceeded to rap it several times with the palm of his hand, in order to see if it was steady. Finding that it was decidedly shaky, he uttered a satisfied grunt and went away again. After another ten minutes the aged Blencowe returned, not, as Lady Eleanor had fondly hoped, with the tea-tray, but with a small chip of wood in his hand, which he carefully fixed under the shaky leg; then rising, he smote the table as before.

'That will do, Blencowe,' said Mrs. Freeman wearily. Blencowe gave the table a final rap, then went off again, and came back, this time with a cloth. Having spread it, he again shambled away, and after another long interval, the tea-tray was borne in in triumph. Setting it down cautiously on the table, the old man panted out—

'Best not go for to shake that, now.'

Finally, a plate of thick bread and butter, and a large home-made cake were brought, and Blencowe having remained a few minutes to contemplate his handiwork, and

to ascertain if his mistress stood in need of any further advice, at length thought fit to retire, and was seen no more.

'Poor old Jacob Blencowe!' said Mrs. Freeman, beginning to pour out tea. 'He has served my husband's family faithfully for fifty years, and he will not give up working, though he is certainly too old. We do all we can to spare him.'

Lady Eleanor was much shocked at this speech; she earnestly represented to her hostess, to whom she had taken rather a fancy, the extreme undesirability of keeping old servants; a race of beings at whose hands she declared herself to have suffered 'an absolute martyrdom' during her early married life.

Meanwhile David, feeling that he had sufficiently done his duty in the matter of hay-making, informed Mr. Freeman that he feared he must reluctantly abandon that delightful pursuit.

'Ho!' said the Squire, as he wiped the moisture from his brow, 'had enough of it, I daresay.'

'Not at all,' protested David, putting on his coat. 'I should be delighted to go on for—for any length of time. But I have to drive my mother home, you know.'

'Well, you have earned a drink,' said Mr. Freeman, laying down his fork, but not resuming his coat. 'Have a taste of my home-brewed.'

They walked together to the house, the troop of children, led by Miss Goodenough and Edith, following them.

'You don't know much of farming, I suppose,' said Mr. Freeman.

'Well, I've not been brought up to it exactly,' replied David. 'I've been in India with my regiment; and my people never owned a property till now.'

'My family,' said the Squire, 'have lived on this soil since the days of King Alfred. We've been farmers for generations, and I aint ashamed of it. We're respected in the neighbourhood, I can tell you.'

Here a labourer passing touched his hat.

'They all do that,' said the Squire; 'they touch their

hats to me—plain John Freeman—as readily as to the Duke of Brazenose.’

David expressed the satisfaction which this happy state of things afforded him, and the Squire continued : ‘It’s all very fine to have a handle to your name, and so forth, but the Duke is not one whit more respected than I am. Not but what he’s a civil man enough, as dukes go,’ said Mr. Freeman charitably. ‘He never passes my gate without saying “How d’ye do, Freeman? Fine weather for the crops”—or the like. Once he asked leave to make a short cut through my spinney. I gave it to him too’—in a meditative tone. ‘I’m not against doing a good turn to a neighbour. But now for the home-brewed.’

They had by this time reached the hall, and the Squire, taking two huge tankards from the sideboard, despatched Edith, who was close behind, to get them filled with ale. The rest of the children tumbled in a body into the parlour, followed by Miss Goodenough, who endeavoured to exercise some slight restraint upon the younger members. Edith joined them as soon as she had fetched the ale. And now a general clamour began in the parlour.

‘Mamma, may I have some tea?’

‘May I have some too, mamma?’

‘And I?’ ‘and I?’

‘Oh, mamma! I *want* some cake!’

‘I cannot possibly give you all tea,’ said Mrs. Freeman in her plaintive, oppressed voice. ‘You may finish the bread and butter, if you like. Miss Goodenough, will you take a cup of tea? Edith dear, here is yours.’

The children’s attention having been directed to the bread and butter, there was quiet for a moment, then again the outcry arose—

‘Mamma, my piece had no butter on it.’

‘Mamma, Edwy’s piece was much bigger than mine.’

‘Mamma, Alfred’s taken the last.’

‘Mayn’t I have some cake, mamma?’

Mrs. Freeman cut two large slices of cake into fragments, and distributed them impartially; and at the same moment the Squire and David made their appearance.

Mrs. Freeman offered the latter some tea, which he declined, and asked leave to fetch the carriage. The children, with whom he seemed to have become rather popular, accompanied him in a body, slamming the door violently as they went out. Lady Eleanor once more shuddered visibly.

'And how do you like Alkerton, my lady?' inquired Mr. Freeman, crossing his legs; he had thrown himself into his arm-chair.

'I have hardly been there long enough to judge,' replied Lady Eleanor in her most chilling tone; it is extremely inconvenient in many ways.'

'Oh! I daresay you feel being so far from church,' said Mrs. Freeman sympathetically.

'Well, that is undoubtedly a great drawback,' said Lady Eleanor, to whom this disadvantage now occurred for the first time; 'and then the utter want of servants' accommodation——'

'I don't know about that, I am surc,' said the Squire. 'Fine old place, though; historical, they say. I don't pretend to know much of these matters, but Miss Goodenough here will tell you. She has it all at her fingers'-ends.'

'Alkerton Priory,' said Miss Goodenough, opening her mouth in instruction, 'was built about the commencement of the fifteenth century; it has since been greatly altered and added to. It was taken possession of by Master Wilfred Popham, after the ejection of the monks by Henry VIII.'

'A fine old Saxon family, the Pophams,' put in the Squire.

'Yes,' said Miss Goodenough, 'a brave, but unfortunate race. Misfortune, it was formerly believed, pursued the sacrilegious possessor of church lands, and this remnant of Romish superstition acquired some credence in the minds of the ignorant peasantry in this neighbourhood from the fact that from first to last the family of Popham has been subject to a series of the direst calamities.'

'Really?' said Lady Eleanor, rather startled.

'This is not very pleasant hearing for Lady Eleanor,' said Mrs. Freeman. 'You must not think——'

‘Pshaw!’ said the Squire, ‘a pack of papistical rubbish. It was a happy day for England when the rascally old monks were cleared out. As to the Pophams, to be sure the old Squire did lose his money, and his eldest son broke his neck out hunting, but what has that to do with church lands, I should like to know?’

‘At any rate, let us hope that the monks’ vengeance was satisfied upon the Pophams,’ said Lady Eleanor.

Half a dozen or so of the children now burst into the room to announce that the carriage had come, and Lady Eleanor and David, having made their adieux with many polite acknowledgments of the delightful afternoon they had spent, at length drove off, and reached home without further adventure.

The drive was accomplished almost in silence, for Lady Eleanor met all her son’s attempts at conversation with such determined ill-humour that he judged it more prudent to leave her to her own reflections. Had David seemed disposed to be aggrieved or out of temper himself, her own injuries would have been forgotten, and she would have found a virtuous satisfaction in lecturing him on the disobliging and uncharitable spirit which he displayed; but David, although he made some wry faces over the recollection of the home-brewed ale, seemed to have been rather exhilarated than otherwise by his afternoon’s work. Therefore, his having left her for nearly an hour and a half with a neighbour with whom she did not care to become intimate was an offence which she was not then disposed to condone.

At the hall door they were met by Lionel. ‘Well!’ said he, ‘have you only just come back? The Anglo-Saxon gate did not then succeed in repelling the Norman invader?’

‘You boys are always talking about Anglo-Saxons,’ said Lady Eleanor indignantly, as she swept into the house. ‘And I consider it an exceedingly poor joke.’

CHAPTER XII.

'And though I stood abasit for a lite,
No wonder was ; for why ? my wittis all -
Were so o'ercome with pleasance and delight—
Only through letting of my eyen fall—
That suddenly my heart became her thrall
For ever of free will, for of menace
There was no token in her sweete face.'

BEFORE David could carry out his intention of offering a visit to his relations at Chippingham, a letter arrived from Mr. Macdonald of Ardvoira requiring his immediate presence in London about some business connected with the estate. Mr. Macdonald was an old infirm man, and David, who was his cousin and next heir, was glad to be able to relieve him of any troublesome business transactions to which the old man was unequal.

'I shall have to go up to town this afternoon,' he observed at breakfast one morning, a day or two after the visit to the Freemans. 'Old Ardvoira seems very urgent that I should see Turnbull at once, as he happens to be in London.'

'Why, what is the matter ?' asked Lady Eleanor.

'Some business about the rents,' replied David, who was not inclined to be very communicative about his affairs, 'and seeing this chap now will save me a journey to Glasgow. I don't want to go to Scotland before the Twelfth.'

'Why not start at once ?' said Mr. Fitzgerald, who, arrayed in a gorgeous Japanese dressing-gown, was breakfasting with his family that morning. 'You young men are always procrastinating. You could be ready in half an hour.'

'You could go down to Chippingham on your way back, David,' said his mother, who had been meditating upon her own schemes. 'It would not be much out of your way.'

'And there you could make love to the fair Elsie Ross,' said Lionel. 'Allow *me* to contribute a suggestion.'

'You speak like a book, mother,' said David, ignoring the proposals of the other members of his family. 'I'll write to the General as soon as I see my way.'

'Whilst you are away, I shall have your room put to rights—*scrubbed*,' said Lady Eleanor resolutely. 'The house has been left in a disgraceful condition, so Mrs. Betts tells me.'

'Good heavens!' exclaimed David, 'scrubbed?' what a violent proceeding! I am sure it is quite clean.'

'As to you, Lionel,' she continued, 'your room is worse than David's. You will have to turn out, and live in the west wing for a few days.'

'Why?' said Lionel sulkily. 'I'm not going to have my room scrubbed. It's a—a beastly thing to do.'

'Do *not* talk such nonsense,' said his mother. 'People must be clean, I suppose.'

'Clean?' retorted her son. 'There is nothing more *filthy* than soap and water. It gets into the crevices and breeds a pestilence——'

'*Will* you be quiet, Lionel,' groaned Mr. Fitzgerald, holding his head. 'You are insupportable.'

'Why?' again demanded Lionel. 'I am only telling you that soap and water——'

'I am not sure that turpentine and bee's-wax——' began Lady Eleanor.

'Bee's-wax your grandmother!' shouted Lionel. 'Leave it alone altogether, I say.'

A hot argument then ensued between Lionel and his parents, which lasted during the whole of breakfast-time. David was thus left to arrange his plans as he liked best; by and by he proceeded leisurely to the stables, followed by Lionel, who only stopped at the door of the dining-room to have the last word by intimating his unalterable convic-

tion that nothing putrified, or bred a pestilence, so rapidly as soap and water, when applied to a bedroom floor, unless it was bee's-wax and turpentine.'

'Poor old Freddy seems rather short in the temper just now,' observed David, lighting a cigarette. 'I fancy he is more so than he used to be. Uncomfortable in his inside, I suppose, poor old chap.'

'He is always rather chippy on the days when he puts on that dressing-gown,' said Lionel, 'but he has got another which is worse; the one, you know, with Leviathan taking his pastime thereon. I don't see any particular signs of decay about him, however. What train do you go by, David?'

'2.48,' replied David. 'Why not come up to town with me, and get your hair cut?'

'You forget, my dear fellow,' said Lionel, puffing himself out in imitation of his stepfather, 'that I am studying for my matriculation, and every moment is precious. Have I time to waste in personal decoration?'

'It is true,' said David seriously, 'you never will pass, Lionel, if you go on as you are doing. And if you don't get into Oxford, what the dickens are you going to do?'

'I shall go to Australia. I have thought of it often, and it is the only thing I am fit for.'

'Oh!' said David incredulously.

'So you see it does not matter whether I pass or not. Come and look at the hunters.'

They were in the stable by this time, and Lionel was examining with great interest the two hunters which were destined for his use in the coming winter, apparently oblivious of his lately expressed intention of leaving the country.

After a prolonged survey of the horses, Lionel somewhat ostentatiously informed his brother that he was now going to Mr. Blandford; and on entering the library to fetch a book, he found his parents there holding a conference.

Lady Eleanor's mind was for the moment so full of David's prospects, that she could not rest till she had poured all her doubts and perplexities into her husband's

ear. Mr. Fitzgerald was too much occupied with his own ailments to be a very sympathetic listener, but for this his wife cared little; it never occurred to her, apparently, that her own grievances were not the theme of everybody's thoughts, and a listener of some sort was a necessity to her.

'It is awkward this letter having come for David just now,' she said. 'Though if he does not take this opportunity of going to Chippingham, he'll never do it, and I should be so unhappy if he were to offend old General Lindsay, who has invited him twice since he came home.'

'Undoubtedly he ought to go,' said Mr. Fitzgerald. 'I do not comprehend your difficulty, my dear Eleanor.'

'Don't you know the Mortimers are coming here next week, and we shall have to make up a party? Then I wanted to ask Laura Stockton. Such a nice girl, you know—really a superior girl. The society of women like that is just what David needs. She is not like the general run of girls, thinking of nothing but amusement.'

'Exactly so,' said Mr. Fitzgerald. 'It is a most extraordinary thing, Eleanor, that whenever I stretch out my left arm—in this manner—I feel the most exquisite pain.'

'Do not stretch it out then, dearest Frederick, I implore you. And you know, on the death of an aunt, she will come into nearly £3000 a year.'

'Can it proceed from the heart?' inquired Mr. Fitzgerald irrelevantly.

Can what proceed?—oh, your arm; nonsense! you have kept it too long in one position. You see, there is no use in asking any nice girls whilst David is away.'

'David is far better unmarried yet awhile, I should say. Why not leave him alone?'

'He will be falling in love,' said Lady Eleanor solemnly; 'I know it. He is just at the age——' At this moment the door opened; she stopped, but seeing it was only Lionel, she continued: 'He is just the kind of boy to ruin himself by some imprudent attachment; and if we do not throw nice girls in his way, whose fault will it be but ours? I am not sure but that I ought to give Caroline Lindsay a hint. What do you think? Those young men just home

from India always want to marry every girl they see. Now you know they do, Frederick !'

Frederick appeared doubtful, but Lionel promptly replied for him: 'Certainly they do, mother—a most immoral frame of mind. That is David's condition to a T.'

'Leave the room, sir!' suddenly thundered Mr. Fitzgerald, rousing himself to a supreme effort. 'Eleanor, that boy is insufferable.'

'Lionel dear, do not be so tiresome,' said his mother. 'Why do you not go to your reading? Well, Frederick, I see your arm is paining you; come upstairs, and I will send for Pritchard.'

'I am going,' said Lionel with condescension. 'Do not disturb yourselves on my account, I beg.'

He then very deliberately chose three books out of the shelves, after which he proceeded slowly to the door, stopping on his way to smell the flowers, and to make a careful examination of every object that he passed; then apparently changing his mind, he went suddenly to the window, swung himself out, and disappeared. Mr. Fitzgerald groaned.

'You are ruining that boy, Eleanor, and unless a severe course is taken with him, he will be a disgrace and a scandal to all with whom he is connected.'

'You have excited yourself, Frederick,' said Lady Eleanor coldly. 'I suppose, you forget that the doctor forbade all excitement; but there is no use in talking to you whilst you are in this state.'

She left the room in displeasure, and went to find her elder son, but David kept himself well out of the way till luncheon time, and as he started on his journey immediately afterwards, she had no opportunity of speaking to him alone.

On his arrival in London, David went at once to the lodging of Mr. Turnbull, and, being requested to wait a little until that gentleman came in, he employed his leisure moments in writing a note to Mrs. Lindsay to offer a visit.

It turned out afterwards that he had been premature in

making his plans, as the business which had brought him to town detained him longer than he expected ; and it was not till two or three days afterwards that he found himself at liberty. Whilst in the train on his way to Chippingham, he suddenly recollected that he had forgotten to let the Lindsays know exactly when to expect him, as he had promised to do in the telegram which he had despatched the day before.

‘It can’t matter much, however,’ he thought, ‘as they seldom have any visitors ; and if the house is full, I can but go away again.’

‘Well, Howell, how are you ? All well here ?’ said he, as the butler’s well-known face appeared at the door.

‘Thank you, sir, all tolerably well, sir. Glad to see you returned. The General and the ladies is out driving, sir.’

‘Oh !’ said David, pausing with his foot on the step.

‘But Miss Ross is in the garden, I believe, sir. Shall I send to the station for your baggage ?’

‘No, never mind, the porter is going to send it up.’

David walked into the drawing-room, and from the windows took a careful survey of the garden, in order to ascertain, if possible, what Miss Ross was like before making her acquaintance. He could see no one, however, so he stepped out through the window, and walked leisurely round.

The plants had been somewhat battered by the recent rain, and a hedge of sweet-peas, which had been laid flat, was just beginning to recover itself, but the sun now shone out bright and hot, and had already tinged the apricots on the south wall. The pond at the bottom of the garden was not visible from the drawing-room windows, and as David approached it, he caught sight of a girl’s figure in a white dress, sitting on the garden bench. Her face was turned away, and she did not see him ; she seemed to be watching three or four white ducks, which were swimming in the pond, and which, every now and then, reversed themselves, after the manner of ducks, and seemed capable of remaining head downwards in the water for a surprising length of time.

There was something listless and drooping in the girl's attitude ; from where David stood he could see the thick plaits of fair hair under her sailor hat, and note the graceful outlines of her figure. Across her knee she held the long stalk of a tall white lily, which had been broken by the rain. It was a pretty picture, the young man thought ; he wondered what the face would be like, when she should turn it round ; he wondered what she was thinking of so intently. Beside the girl, on the gravel walk, a little brown dog lay asleep in the sunshine ; it was stretched out in the attitude of a dead pig, and did not, therefore, add to the poetry of the scene.

David came a very little nearer ; the dead pig gave signs of returning life. A fly had settled on Hans' nose ; he sneezed, knitted his brows, and suddenly becoming aware of an intruder, he growled fiercely, while every hair on his back and tail stood erect, 'like quills upon the fretful porcupine.' His mistress turned round, and David, taking off his hat, came forward hastily.

'I have arrived unexpectedly, I fear. I hope I have not startled you,' he said.

Elsie rose, apparently not in the least startled or discomposed. 'Mr. Lindsay?' she said in a half-questioning voice.

Before she was aware of his presence, David had unconsciously been keeping himself from disappointment, by thinking that the face which was turned from him was probably plain ; but he could find no fault with the small oval face, the delicate features, or the clear gray eyes which met his so frankly. He felt almost as embarrassed as if she could have read his thoughts, and only said rather awkwardly—

'We are cousins, I think.'

'I believe so,' said Elsie demurely. 'We have been expecting you, but Aunt Caroline did not know when you would arrive. They will be back from their drive very soon.'

She maintained some slight degree of severity in remembrance of his offence, but, mindful of the laws of hospitality,

she was prepared to relent the moment she saw signs of contrition.

‘The fact is, I forgot to send another telegram. I hope—do you know—is it inconvenient in any way?’

‘Not in the least, said Elsie cordially. ‘Uncle Henry has been looking forward to seeing you. Hans!’ turning to admonish him slightly with the stalk of her lily—‘*will* you stop growling at your cousin!’ for Hans had continued to protest in a sort of musical undertone, ever since the arrival of the stranger.

David laughed heartily, and stooped down to make friends with the little dog.

‘My aunt used to have a pug,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ replied Elsie, ‘she has two, but they have gone out driving. Aunt Caroline will be disappointed not to have been in when you came. She had prepared a grand reception for you yesterday,—but perhaps——’ hesitating a little—‘it may be just as—comfortable for you not to have it.’

‘Reception?’ said David; ‘you alarm me. What on earth was she going to do.’

‘Never mind, it won’t happen now—there is the carriage!’

If Elsie expected that the young man would at once joyfully hasten to greet his relatives, she was mistaken; for David lingered, and expressed his opinion that it was ‘only some one come to call.’

‘No, I saw the carriage. Howell will tell Aunt Caroline you are come; had you not better meet them?’

David rose reluctantly. ‘Are not you coming in?’ he said.

‘I shall come by and by,’ replied Elsie placidly; and he had no choice but to depart.

‘From her garden-seat she presently heard the loud barking of the pugs, followed by a chorus of exclamations, and smiled a little to herself. She waited until she thought that the first raptures had had time to subside, and then went in to make the tea, as was her daily duty.

On entering the drawing-room she found Aunt Caroline seated beside David on the sofa, holding his hand tenderly

between both hers, and gazing with fond affection into his face, whilst the General and Miss Maynard occupied positions in the background.

Elsie was glad to see that her aunt's disappointment was wholly forgotten, and that her uncle appeared to be in the best of spirits. At dinner there was quite a lively flow of talk and laughter; no subject of conversation was frowned upon or fraught with severe moral lessons; the Elms seemed like a different house, and Elsie breathed freely in the more genial atmosphere.

CHAPTER XIII.

'As a lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.'

ELSIE felt grateful to David Lindsay for the new life which he had brought with him, and could not help finding him a most agreeable companion to herself; while he, on his part, was unconsciously fulfilling his mother's prediction, by falling in love with the first girl he saw.

Elsie's beauty attracted him in the first place, and then her utter ignorance of the world, her unlikeness to other girls, and her disposition to look up to and admire his superior knowledge, combined to render her perfect in his eyes. He thought her the loveliest creature the sun ever shone upon, and every moment seemed wasted which was not spent in her society. The visit of a few days, which he had intended to make, lengthened itself out indefinitely, to the great content of his uncle and aunt. As Elsie had once expressed herself glad that her uncle should be kept happy and amused, David exerted himself to the utmost to please the old man, and, indeed, he would have undertaken a far more difficult task to win from her the least token of approval.

Although he could not discover from Elsie's manner the smallest sign that she returned his feelings, she treated him with great cordiality, and they were soon on intimate terms. Very early in their acquaintance David had suggested that it was the privilege of cousins to call each other by their Christian names; a piece of information which Elsie received with meekness, and immediately acted upon.

'I have never had any cousins before,' she said one day — 'none that I knew, at least.'

She and David were supposed to be playing lawn tennis, but, having soon become exhausted by the exercise, were now sitting together on the grass.

'How is it that you were never here before,' said David?

'Why am I here now? you had better ask. I had not a stepmother before, and I was the only one at home, you see.'

'Odd that we should both be afflicted with a step-parent. We ought to have great sympathy with one another on that account,' observed David sentimentally.

'But your stepfather is very nice, is he not?'

'Poor old Freddy! I suppose he is. He is a terrible fellow for quarrelling with his neighbours, but he was always very kind to us.'

'That's like papa. *He* quarrelled with his neighbour—he has only got one—and I think it was a great pity.'

'Do you mind telling me the subject of dispute?'

'It was a raven,' replied Elsie. 'Lord Ochil kept a tame raven, and it used to bite my father's legs when he went to call.'

'Oh!' said David, 'I don't wonder he was hurt.'

'His legs were not,' said Elsie laughing, 'because he always wears very strong gaiters, but—I suppose his feelings were. The raven never bit any one else, and he thought Lord Ochil kept it on purpose to annoy him. But what did Mr. Fitzgerald quarrel about?'

'The occasions were so numerous,' said David, 'I forget most of them. The last was about a carpet-bag, if I recollect right; I rather think that was the cause of our leaving Devonshire.'

'Do you call your stepfather Freddy or Frederick?' inquired Elsie after a long and serious pause.

David laughed. 'I don't exactly call him either, Elsie.'

'I have always said "Euphemia" in speaking to my stepmother, although it sounds rather familiar; that is why I ask you. What *do* you call him, David?'

'Well, I—a—in fact, I call him papa,' replied David, blushing. 'It is his own wish,' he added, recovering himself, 'and one does not like to annoy him by refusing. If

he expressed a desire to be called Old Nick, I should waive my scruples and consent.'

'You are quite right,' said Elsie gravely. 'Shall we have another game?'

David very soon made it his daily practice to present himself in the drawing-room during Elsie's hours of study; and after making himself agreeable to Miss Maynard for a few minutes, he generally induced her pupil to leave her books and come out with him; and gradually he contrived that he and Elsie should be together almost the whole day long. Of course this could not go on without Mrs. Lindsay's knowledge, but the idea of David as Elsie's lover did not, at first, enter her mind.

When in his aunt's presence, David took little notice of Elsie, appearing to be entirely engrossed with Aunt Caroline, who, in the excitement of her nephew's visit, forgot to take her usual interest in all Elsie's proceedings. She attributed the length of David's stay entirely to his attachment to herself. 'Dear good fellow!' she observed to Elsie; 'he appreciates so much the privileges of a truly Christian home. Poor Eleanor is, I fear, sadly given up to the world.'

Being desirous of exhibiting her Indian hero to the neighbourhood, Mrs. Lindsay not only took him with her to any festivities that were going on, but even gave a garden party at the Elms, an event which had been unheard of for years, and which was on a scale of splendour calculated to strike awe into the hearts of the Chippingham population. David expressed himself delighted with all these entertainments, as well he might; for did not Elsie grace them all with her sweet presence, and did not she far outshine the innumerable maidens who, in their freshest muslin dresses, thronged the lawns and gardens?

Still, he preferred to have her society alone, and soon found that in the grounds they were much too liable to interruption.

'Why should we not have a boat?' he said one day. 'Do you ever go on the river, Elsie?'

'I should *love* it,' said Elsie; 'but I do not believe we

may. Uncle Henry once had an attack because I walked by the river.'

'By yourself?' said David. 'I don't wonder. I should say that was calculated to produce the very worst effects upon him. But with *me*—that is a very different thing.'

'You really think I ought not to walk alone? I thought it such nonsense. They do not even like me to go on the road for fear of meeting a tramp—as if tramps ever did anything to anybody!'

'Ladies are generally afraid of tramps,' said David. 'I do not know that they are usually ferocious; but I consider it most undesirable for you to walk by yourself. It's enough to give anybody a fit—an attack, to think of it.'

'Ah, well!' said Elsie, 'perhaps you have the Lindsay constitution.'

The proposal of taking Elsie on the river did not find favour in Mrs. Lindsay's eyes; and she was now becoming rather suspicious of the fraternal affection which she believed to exist between her nephew and niece. In one of her confidential talks with David she had spoken enthusiastically of Mr. Maynard, of his worth and talents, and hinted at the desirability of Elsie being settled near her. David had not said much in reply, but she was struck by his evident dislike of the notion, and he had very soon made an excuse to leave her and go out. A few minutes later she saw him and Elsie, apparently in earnest conversation, walking leisurely through the paddock in the direction of the river. From that moment she determined to be on her guard, and not permit the close intercourse which had hitherto existed between the cousins.

'Where are you going, dear?' she said that same afternoon, as Elsie reappeared in the drawing-room after tea with her hat on.

'David and I were going to play tennis,' was the answer; and David opened the window for her to step out.

'By diligent practice I hope to make a good player of her in time, Aunt Caroline,' he said as he followed her.

Mrs. Lindsay waited till the pair were gone, then she turned to Miss Maynard. 'What are you *about*, Cecilia?

allowing these young people to be constantly together without chaperonage?' she said in her severest tones.

Miss Maynard let the work fall from her trembling hands, and looked up terrified. 'I—I did not suppose——' she faltered.

'You did not suppose it was your duty to *guard* and to watch over your young charge?' said Mrs. Lindsay indignantly. 'Pray, Cecilia, for what purpose did providence bestow reason and eyesight upon you? Now, dry your eyes'—for Cecilia had already taken out her pocket-handkerchief—'put on your bonnet, and go *at once* to the tennis-ground. Prompt and decided action may do much. You cannot efface the past, but you may atone for it in the future.'

The players had not yet begun their game when Miss Maynard hurried towards them.

'Is anything wrong?' asked Elsie, as she went up to her and gently put her bonnet straight.

'No, no, dear,' said Miss Maynard tremulously; 'I came to sit here a little and watch your game.'

'And so you shall,' said Elsie, looking round, 'but the grass is damp just here. If she had a chair, David, or a rug—wait, I will fetch one.'

David ran after her. 'Must she sit here?' he whispered. 'It is nonsense, you know; she will get rheumatism.'

'She shall sit where she likes, poor dear,' said Elsie, who had observed the traces of tears on Miss Maynard's countenance. 'You get her a chair, David, and I will fetch the rug.'

David fetched both, and a footstool as well; Miss Maynard was comfortably placed, and the game proceeded, but not with great spirit. When the set was finished David again inquired with much solicitude whether Miss Maynard did not find it damp.

'Not at all, thank you,' she replied; 'not at all, but I am sure you have played enough; you will tire yourselves.'

Elsie laid down her racquet obediently, and came and sat down on a corner of the rug, while David stretched himself on the grass, and began to play with the balls in

rather a gloomy manner. As he did so, one of them accidentally struck Hans, who uttered a loud squeak, but finding to his surprise and joy that he was unhurt, he began to scamper round the lawn in circles, as his custom was when delivered from any imminent danger. David could not help laughing.

‘Where *did* you get that little beast?’ said he.

‘He came straight from Germany,’ replied Elsie, with pride, as she lifted Hans upon her knee. ‘Fraülein Meyer got him from her uncle, Herr Butterkäse, who is a very celebrated dog-fancier. She glanced at David as she spoke, to see if he appeared impressed by this information, but Herr Butterkäse’s fame had evidently not reached his ears before.

‘I am afraid, after all, he is not a pure-bred dachshund,’ she said, ‘but I do not love him any the less on that account,’ and she laid her soft cheek against his little brown head.

David drew nearer, in order to caress him also, saying insinuatingly, ‘I think he would be the better of a walk; don’t you?’

Miss Maynard hastily interposed. ‘I think, dear, your aunt would wish you to come in; you have done quite enough.’

After that day David had very few opportunities of having any private conversations with Elsie, which annoyed him the more, as the 12th of August was approaching, and his visit must soon come to an end. He was bound to be in Scotland at that date, as old Mr. Macdonald had invited a shooting-party, and David was expected to entertain the guests; besides, he had arranged to travel with his friend Ponsonby, who was to meet him in London, so that he could upon no pretext delay his departure. He felt that he could not leave Elsie without ascertaining her feelings towards him. True, he was not at present in a position to marry, and had, therefore, been inclined to hesitate before deliberately seeking to win her affections. But the hint about Mr. Maynard, which Mrs. Lindsay had thrown out, decided him to try his fate without delay. He knew that

his aunt would never rest until she got her young charge married, or at least engaged.

'And why not to me?' thought David. 'I shall be able to marry in a year or two at latest.' But the opportunity to speak seemed denied him. He came into the drawing-room one morning during Elsie's study hour, asked in a very downcast manner for a sheet of writing paper, and sat down to write a note, with an expression of the deepest melancholy upon his countenance. Elsie glanced at him furtively from time to time, as she was reading, wondering what had happened. Had he received bad news? had anything disagreed with him? Presently Herbert came in with a message that a young person wished to see Miss Maynard in Parkins' room.

'One of my Friendly girls, dear,' said Miss Maynard, rising. 'How very inopportune! She has come to consult with me about a situation. Continue your reading, my love; I shall be back presently.'

As soon as she had gone David looked up; Elsie appeared to be reading diligently.

'Elsie!' said he softly.

'Is anything the matter, David? bad news or anything?'

'Not news, but—Elsie, I shall have to start for Scotland on Tuesday.'

'I see nothing bad about that,' said Elsie. She kept her face turned away, and spoke very quietly, but David noticed or fancied that there was the least possible tremor in her voice. Here was his opportunity, and he was not slow to avail himself of it. Miss Maynard's absence did not last long, but before the 'Friendly girl' had time to come to a decision as to whether or not she could bring herself to wash the front-door steps (which was not her work at all, but Sarah's), these two young people had fully arrived at a mutual understanding. The sudden shutting of a door by and by recalled Elsie to herself; she looked round startled.

'Come out with me,' said David entreatingly. 'I have so much to say to you, and we do not know when we may have another chance;' and Elsie yielded.

'What will Aunt Caroline say?' was her first question.

'Never mind Aunt Caroline, I will talk to her. The thing may require a little explanation, but she will be quite pleased in the end. What your father will say is what I am more anxious about at present.'

'I do not see why my father should object,' said Elsie slowly, and with the air of one who impartially weighed the subject. 'I do not see that he need care, one way or the other. Why should he not give me to you as readily as to Aunt Caroline?'

'My darling,' replied David, 'there is no reason why he shouldn't, but every reason, on the contrary, why he should. And that is just what I hope to convince him of. But he might possibly think, just at first, you know, that we had not enough to live upon.'

'Do you mean to go and see him, then? to go to Rossie?' cried Elsie. 'Oh, David, do! it would please him, I think. It would be better than writing.'

'To be sure I mean to go. I shall go to St. Ethernans—that is your town, isn't it? and walk out to Rossie and call some fine day.'

Elsie's eyes shone. 'You must go and see Aunt Grizel too,' she said. 'But where will you go for the night, David? She would take you in, I know, for my sake, and because you are a relation. She will be delighted to see you.'

'I think I had better go to the inn however. I suppose there is one?'

Elsie pondered. 'There is the Star—but I don't like your going to an inn, David; it is dreadful, when you are a relation. And I doubt if it is very respectable. Much better go to Aunt Grizel; only be careful with your port-manteau, and do not scratch the paint off her front door—she hates that.'

It was a great delight to Elsie that David thus intended to make acquaintance with her own people; she no longer felt so cut off from them, and they would be quite sure, she thought, to like him; how could they help it? She did not attach much importance to David's confession of poverty,

except that it made her a little anxious that he should avoid unnecessary expense. She therefore once more warned him against the extortions of the St. Ethernans innkeepers, but on being assured by her lover that he could afford this outlay, she was satisfied, and the conversation wandered off to more interesting subjects.

They had forgotten to take any count of time, and it was nearly the hour for luncheon when an interruption came, in the shape of William, the footman, who informed them that the General wished to see Mr. Lindsay, as there was a telegram awaiting him.

Elsie, suddenly recalled to a sense of her neglect of duty, and the rudeness towards Miss Maynard of which she had been guilty, fled into the house and up to her own room with all speed, and joined the party at luncheon in some trepidation. Her absence, however, had passed unnoticed, except by Miss Maynard, who, though a good deal alarmed by it, had not dared to confess to Mrs. Lindsay that she had for the moment taken her eye off her pupil, whose disappearance would thus be traced to her guardian's negligence.

The arrival of a telegram for their nephew, although no very uncommon occurrence, had thrown both the General and Mrs. Lindsay into a state of the greatest perturbation, and messengers were despatched in all directions to find and bring him in. He met his uncle at the door, waving the envelope in great excitement, and demanding to know its contents. David read the message, crushed the paper in his hand, and thrust it into his pocket with a look of annoyance.

'Eh, what? what?' said the General; 'bad news, eh?'

'No, no, General,' said David, 'it's all right. It is from my mother. There is nothing in it to signify.'

'David!' said Mrs. Lindsay, who, wrapped in a shawl, had come out to support her husband, 'why do you not tell your dear uncle the message? Do you not see how you are agitating him?'

'My mother's messages are apt to be a little confused,' said David. 'She says my stepfather is going to London

to see his doctor; he has not been very well lately, you know. She wants me to meet him at Paddington this afternoon.'

'Eh? to-day?' said the General, 'that's quick work. And are you going?'

'My dearest David, you cannot, surely, hesitate one moment!' cried Aunt Caroline, who, having wound herself up to believe that this message was one of life or death, had no notion of bringing down her mind to common-places. 'You must fly at once to your stepfather's side; you must lose not an instant!'

'I don't believe there is anything the matter with him,' said David doggedly. 'But there is no doubt I shall have to go,' he added, making an effort to throw off his irritation. 'I think his train arrives at 4.30. I am only sorry that my pleasant visit here has come to an end so unexpectedly.'

'Dear, affectionate fellow!' murmured Aunt Caroline, pressing his hand to her heart.

The elders of the party were far too much excited to notice Elsie's pale and troubled looks, which were unobserved by all but David. Mrs. Lindsay, with the General and Miss Maynard, proposed to accompany her nephew to the station, as an object for their afternoon drive. Elsie was left at home, it was 'more judicious,' Mrs. Lindsay thought; yet it gave the lovers time to exchange a parting-word, whilst the ladies were putting on their bonnets.

As he bade her farewell, David cautioned Elsie to say nothing to Aunt Caroline of their engagement.

'I have no time to explain it to her,' he said hurriedly, 'and if she were annoyed at first it would all fall on you. I shall come straight here when I leave Scotland, and then——'

'It would be more *convenient* if she knew,' said Elsie, looking troubled, 'but I will do what you think best, David.'

'The carriage is at the door, sir,' said Howell.

Mrs. Lindsay was a little surprised that Elsie did not appear at the door to say good-bye to her cousin; she would have sent for her, but the bustle of getting into the

carriage occupied some little time ; and the General, one of whose constitutional infirmities was a nervous dread of being late for trains, would hear of no delay, and hustled them off with such rapidity that his own walking-stick, Miss Maynard's parasol, and the pug Bijou were left behind in the confusion.

CHAPTER XIV.

- ' You may train the eagle
To stoop to your fist,
Or you may inveigle
The phoenix of the East.
- ' The lioness, ye may move her
To give o'er her prey,
But you'll ne'er stop a lover,
He'll find out his way.'

WHEN Elsie came down to prayers the next morning she found two letters awaiting her. One was addressed in Aunt Grizel's well-known handwriting, the other, to her surprise, was from David. In the interval between prayers and breakfast she slipped upstairs to read it, not observing the awful sternness of the gaze which Aunt Caroline fixed upon her as she left the room.

David's letter had been written as soon as he reached London; it contained many loving words, and expressions of deep regret at having been unable, through lack of time, to say all he wished, as well as to inform his aunt of their engagement. He concluded by recommending Elsie, on the whole, to keep the secret until his return; but, if she would rather not do so, he would, on receipt of a letter from her, at once write to his aunt himself.

The breakfast-gong had sounded for at least two minutes before Elsie had finished the perusal of this, her first love-letter. She descended hastily, and tried to talk as usual, but all her remarks were received with chilling silence. She could not eat, and was fain to occupy herself with Aunt Grizel's letter, in order to screen herself from observation. As they left the table, Mrs. Lindsay, raising her voice, said,

‘Elspeth ! In half an hour’s time I shall wish to see you in my boudoir.’

Elsie felt for the moment as though the ground were crumbling away under her feet ; but the half hour’s space, which possibly Mrs. Lindsay had intended to add to the appalling nature of the interview, and to increase the terror of the culprit, gave her time to collect herself, and to brace her resolution.

‘Of course it is about David,’ she thought. ‘Aunt Caroline knows, somehow ; but, after all, I have done nothing wrong, and I need not be afraid that David will give me up for Aunt Caroline, or for twenty Aunt Carolines ; so it would be perfect nonsense to give in to her. I wish she was not angry, all the same.’

Mrs. Lindsay was writing when Elsie entered the boudoir, and at first tried to appear as if she did not see her ; but as the girl stood waiting, she suddenly laid down her pen and said : ‘From whom was your letter this morning ?’

‘From David Lindsay,’ said Elsie, turning scarlet, but unhesitating.

Mrs. Lindsay took up her pen again, and fixed Elsie with her eye.

‘As long as you remain under my roof, Elspeth, I permit *no* clandestine correspondence with young men.’

‘Very well, Aunt Caroline, I shall carry on none.’

‘And I wish to know what passed between you and David Lindsay in the garden yesterday ?’

‘David asked me to marry him, and I said I would.’

Mrs. Lindsay started off her seat, her eyes positively glowing like live coals ; but as Elsie did not stir, she sat down again, laid her hand upon her heart, and fetched several deep breaths. When next she spoke, it was in a sepulchral tone.

‘David had *no* right to make such a proposition, nor had you to reply to it thus. A union between you is *impossible*, and even had it been otherwise, your conduct in this affair would have put it out of the question. To receive addresses in that manner, and in the *garden* ! I can imagine nothing more forward and improper.’

‘It was in the drawing-room,’ murmured Elsie.

Mrs. Lindsay waved her hand, as if to put her niece's words away from her. 'I am deeply disappointed in you. Henceforth, Elspeth, *all* communication between you and David is at an end.'

'May I not just answer his letter, Aunt Caroline, and tell him that I mayn't——'

'Answer his letter? Most assuredly not. Had you showed the confidence in me which I have a right to expect, you would *at once* have laid that letter before me.'

As Mrs. Lindsay said this, she gave her niece a searching look; but Elsie, adopting her father's frequent line of conduct, turned on her an utterly expressionless gaze, and made no reply.

'I myself,' said Aunt Caroline, will write to David Alexander Lindsay.'

Elsie was pleased to hear this, knowing that David would understand her position, but maintained her immobility by an effort.

'I am totally at a loss to understand you,' said her aunt, after a pause. 'What do you propose to yourself? To attempt to contract an engagement without a reference to those who are placed by Providence in the position of parents and guardians to you? Have you no sense of filial duty? of the most sacred ties——'

'I have had so little time,' pleaded Elsie. 'I meant to tell you——'

'To tell me!' exclaimed Aunt Caroline. 'You ought to have consulted me beforehand. Now put out of your head all idea of any engagement between you and my nephew, and make the only reparation in your power, by writing a full confession to your father. Sit down at that table—you will find writing materials.'

But a demon of obstinacy seemed to have entered into Elsie.

'I would rather not write to my father to-day, please. I wrote lately, and I have nothing to say to him.'

'Nothing to say to him!!' screamed Aunt Caroline. 'Do you call this whole tissue of deceit and disobedience *nothing?*'

'He would call it nothing,' replied Elsie in an unmoved tone. 'If I were to write and say that I was engaged to David Lindsay, that would be a piece of news—papa likes news—but now there is no need to write that I am not engaged to David Lindsay; he would only say he never supposed I was.'

Mrs. Lindsay was baffled, and did not know what to make of the girl. She had never yet had an encounter with any young woman whom she had not speedily reduced to tears and submission; yet here was Elsie, whom she had always thought particularly soft and gentle, meeting her reproofs with cool impertinence, and without moving a muscle of her face. She signed to her to leave the room, merely remarking that she had not expected to find her affection repaid with heartless ingratitude. But this accusation, which to Mrs. Lindsay meant little, touched the girl at once, and brought her back, repentant, to her side.

'Ah no, Aunt Caroline! not ingratitude. You have been very good to me, and *indeed* I am not ungrateful.' She took her aunt's hand and kissed it. 'But I promised David, and I cannot take it back.'

She left the room quickly, and Mrs. Lindsay sat still, astonished at feeling herself not nearly so angry as she had wished and intended to be. She remained a while pondering over Elsie's extraordinary character, and considering how she could exert her authority over that self-willed young person, without driving her to leave the Elms. At length, gathering herself up, she went with the whole story to her husband, but could get very little satisfaction from him, beyond the admission that a marriage between the young people was not to be thought of at present. When she came to the point of David's proposal to Elsie, and her answer, the General began to chuckle, which he continued to do during the rest of the narrative in so exasperating a manner, that his wife at last left him to enjoy his mirth in solitude. Finally, she proceeded to perform what she esteemed to be her sacred duty under the circumstances—that of writing to the relatives of both the parties concerned, as well as to her nephew himself.

These letters produced, in due course, the following replies :—

Lady Eleanor wrote that 'she was much obliged for her dear Caroline's warning, but begged her not to distress herself by needless anxiety. Young men would be young men, but David's heart, she felt sure, was in the right place. However, she would certainly make a point of speaking to him *most seriously*.'

To David, his mother wrote that she was 'exceedingly shocked and distressed by the account of his conduct which she had received from Mrs. Lindsay. Of all things in the world, what she most disliked was a male flirt, and it gave her great pain to think that a son of hers was apparently becoming one. Some day he would find that he had gone too far, and she wished, in short, that he would come home at once, and explain what he meant by causing all his friends, and especially his anxious and affectionate mother, so much uneasiness.'

Elsie, in like manner, received a letter from her father, in which she was desired to 'put all that nonsense out of her head. She was too young to think of marrying for another ten years. As for this young man, he (the Laird) knew nothing about him, and anything he had heard was very little to his credit. If Elsie could not behave herself where she was she had better come home, but she was to do nothing without consulting her aunt, who seemed to be a very well-intentioned kind of woman.'

To Mrs. Lindsay, Captain Ross merely wrote a short, but courteously worded note, expressive of his great obligation to her for her care of his daughter, and offering to relieve her of the charge should she find it burdensome.

David's letter to Mrs. Lindsay was as follows :—

'MY DEAR AUNT CAROLINE—Your letter caused me the most sincere distress, and I trust you will believe that nothing but the necessity for my instant departure prevented me from confiding to you my hopes and wishes. As it was, I judged it best to wait until I had a personal interview; which I still venture to hope you will not refuse me

when I return to Chippingham in September ; and when I have no doubt of being able to explain to your perfect satisfaction the motives by which I was actuated. One thing I must at once, however, strongly urge upon you ; that, if blame attaches to any one, your censure must, in justice, fall entirely upon me. Of my feelings towards my cousin (which are deeply rooted and unalterable), she was totally ignorant until the moment before I left ; and feeling that it was from me that you would naturally expect first to hear the avowal of my attachment, I requested her to postpone informing you of our engagement until my return. If I have caused distress by undue precipitation, which the ardour of my affection could alone excuse, I can only entreat her forgiveness and yours. As I have had the misfortune to incur your displeasure, I cannot, of course, expect you to receive me at the Elms ; I shall, therefore, put up at the King's Head at Chippingham, about the second week of September, which is the most speedy return I can hope to make, and shall then entreat you to grant me the interview which is so vitally necessary for the elucidation of my past conduct.—With kindest regards to all, believe me, my dear aunt, yours affectionately,

‘DAVID A. LINDSAY.’

The receipt of Mrs. Lindsay's letter, followed in a few days by his mother's, really caused David serious vexation. He blamed himself for his impatience, which had been the means of drawing down his aunt's displeasure upon Elsie, and he could not bear to think of her perhaps suffering from its effects, in the absence of her rightful protector. Yet he could neither return at once nor write to Elsie ; the latter course would only bring fresh trouble upon her. He made his letter to his aunt as conciliatory as he could, bestowing much thought upon its composition, and carefully looking out all the long words in the dictionary, in case of possible mistakes in spelling ; and he determined that his next step before leaving Scotland should be to endeavour to obtain the consent of Elsie's father to their engagement. His mother, he knew, would be averse to it ; he would

therefore send her a few lines to pacify her in the meantime, and trust to his powers of eloquence to persuade her when they met. Nothing doubting of his ability to do so, he wrote off rapidly :—

‘MY DEAR MOTHER—I am sorry any part of my conduct should have caused you annoyance. I do not, certainly, deserve to be called a “flirt,” and if Mrs. Lindsay told you so, all I can say is she must have been misinformed. I have formed no attachment which the most anxious parent could fail to approve; but more of this when I see you. I cannot fix an exact date for my return home, as Ardvoira insists on my staying here another fortnight at least, after which my movements are uncertain; but I hope to despatch another box of grouse shortly. We are having fair sport, but the hot weather is rather against us. Love to all.—Your affectionate son,

‘D. A. LINDSAY.’

CHAPTER XV.

‘Sie haben mich gequälet,
Geärgert blau und blass ;
Die eine mit ihrer Liebe,
Die andere mit ihrem Hass.’

AFTER the scene in her aunt's boudoir Elsie was in disgrace for many weary days.

Mrs. Lindsay scarcely spoke to her, and when she did, addressed her with elaborate politeness, and never asked her to perform any of the little services which she had been accustomed to render. Her entrance was the signal for cold looks and gloomy silence ; and even Miss Maynard, whose friend and champion Elsie had so often proved herself, was scarcely less chilling in her manner than Mrs. Lindsay. Elsie justly set this down to cowardice, but it hurt her nevertheless. She did not remonstrate ; pride forbade her even to appear aware of it, she only carried her head a little higher, and was silent. Parkins, too, was maliciously triumphant ; she, in fact, had been the original cause of the whole disturbance, having enjoyed a full view of the lovers in the garden from her window, and at once hastened to inform her mistress of their guilt.

The Laird's letter did not tend to raise his daughter's spirits, yet she had expected from him some communication of the kind, and she thought he might be brought to relent. Her faith in David was unbounded ; what he would do she did not know, nor even try much to conjecture, but he was a wonderful being, like the Prince in a fairy tale, who would be sure to come by and by to her deliverance. But in the meantime her heart was heavy ; her aunt's dis-

pleasure weighed upon her ; and she began to torment herself with doubts as to whether she really had not been forward and improper, and if so, what David must think of her, now that he had time calmly to review the circumstances of the case. She had some thoughts of going home, but she could not make up her mind to leave her aunt in anger, so she tried, by patient attention to her wishes, to win back her favour.

The General was always kind ; he would kiss his niece stealthily when he met her in the passage, and frame pretexts for keeping her talking to him in the study. He took great pleasure in a love affair, and would have been delighted to promote his nephew's interests, had he dared.

One day towards the end of August, Mrs. Lindsay received a visit from Mr. Maynard, who had just returned to Gravehurst, and who requested to see her alone. He told her that his health had suffered a good deal in London, and that he had given up all idea of returning to his old work. He had now become convinced that it was right for him to remain in his parish, and devote himself to the duties which lay before him there. He stopped, and looked at Mrs. Lindsay, who heard him with profound attention, but as she gave him no word or sign of encouragement, he became a little confused. He went on to say, in a slightly aggrieved tone, that he now hoped—he might be allowed to express a hope—that Mrs. Lindsay would sanction his addresses to her niece, as he was now in a position to marry.

Mrs. Lindsay waited till he had quite finished his speech before she answered :

‘What you desire, Ernest, is entirely out of my power to grant you.’

Mr. Maynard was extremely taken aback by this reply. ‘Forgive me—I cannot surely have misunderstood you—your words when we parted gave me hope that ——’

‘I gave you a *warning*,’ said Mrs. Lindsay, ‘a warning which you disregarded. And now’—she spread out her hands—‘What is the result? My niece’s affections are plighted to another !’

'Impossible!' cried Ernest, starting, and turning pale with anger. 'Excuse me, but surely you cannot mean——'

'My meaning,' said Mrs. Lindsay, 'is, I trust, perfectly comprehensible. Elsie's heart is given to another, and that other, my husband's very dear grandnephew!'

'In that case,' said Ernest, rising, 'I have nothing more to say. Do I understand that Miss Ross is engaged to your—grandnephew?'

'No,' said Mrs. Lindsay, 'you do not. Sit down again, and endeavour to command your temper. An engagement between them is strictly forbidden, being contrary to the wishes of their parents. It is possible, therefore,—Ernest, remember I only say possible,—that after a lapse of time you may succeed in winning her affections, although at first your addresses will probably be distasteful to her.'

'If Miss Ross prefers another man,' said Ernest, still in a white heat of indignation, 'I have no wish to force her inclinations. I withdraw my claim, and will now, if you please, take my leave for the present.'

He bowed stiffly, and cutting short the moral lesson which was trembling on Mrs. Lindsay's lips, left the room.

'A shocking temper,' said she to herself, 'and what want of respect to me! A young man with so little control over his passions is totally unfitted to be a clergyman, and so I shall certainly tell him when next we meet. At present, I sadly fear, he is in no state to be reasoned with.'

She unlocked a drawer, took out David's letter which she had received about a week before, and which had occasioned her unusual indecision of mind. She had been softened by it, and would have liked to accord him the interview he desired, forgive him with pomp, and readmit him to her favour; but this could not well be done without also giving her consent to his marriage. She had put off showing the letter to the General, preferring to nurse her indignation against David a little longer. But now, locking the drawer again, and saying with firmness, 'I must have no secrets from my husband,' Mrs. Lindsay marched with an air of martyr-like resolution to the study and laid the document before the General, with the remark that

David, dear fellow, seemed to regret his want of confidence, and had it not been that poor Eleanor would disapprove, he might, perhaps, have been permitted to come to the Elms.

‘Come?’ said the General, when he had, with some difficulty, mastered the contents of his nephew’s epistle—‘to be sure he must come. Can’t let him go to the inn, eh?’

This was exactly the point to which Mrs. Lindsay wished to bring her husband, having felt extremely dull ever since David left, and since she had quarrelled with Elsie.

‘My own Henry,’ said she, ‘consider the danger to which we should expose our young charge!’

‘No help for it,’ said the General—‘must have him, must have him! Going to bring his friend too, you know,—eh—h’m!’

‘I am surprised at his selecting the King’s Head,’ said Mrs. Lindsay. ‘You know, dear, by what class of persons it is frequented.’

‘Can’t let them go to the inn, you know. Never do—never do—most inhospitable.’

‘If you feel it so, dear,’ said Mrs. Lindsay, with resignation, ‘of course your wishes are paramount.’

The good lady now knew no rest or peace of mind till she could have a reconciliation with Elsie; but this, she felt sure, would not be difficult to accomplish. She watched the girl one whole morning as she sat sewing in silence without raising her eyes, or moved about in a weary, subdued way, but could not, just then, find any pretext for speaking to her. While she was watching her niece, Mrs. Lindsay happened to drop the needle with which she herself was working; she uttered an exclamation of annoyance, for she had a peculiar dislike to losing anything, however insignificant.

‘Dear, dear!’ she said, ‘how very vexatious! I cannot find my needle, and I set a particular value upon that needle!’

Miss Maynard was at once upon her knees to search

for the missing article, and Elsie too crossed the room to see if she could be of any help.

'Go to your seat, Cecilia !' said Mrs. Lindsay, irritably. 'You, with your short sight, need not attempt to find anything.'

'Here it is, Aunt Caroline !' cried Elsie.

Mrs. Lindsay took the small pale face between both her hands and kissed it on each cheek.

'Bless you, my love !' said she emphatically.

Elsie felt that by this act she was restored to favour, and rejoiced ; but to her, who had borne hostility with such proud composure, the change was almost too sudden. She presently made an excuse to retire to her room, and it was not until some time had elapsed, and after many applications of warm water to her eyes, that she ventured to descend, and cautiously to seat herself, with her back to the light, and armed with a large book, to screen herself from observation. Mrs. Lindsay had, however, the tact to take no notice ; neither did she allude at all to David, nor to Elsie's own misdemeanours. For several days all was peace and serenity ; Elsie and her aunt usually sat hand in hand, while Miss Maynard was thrust out, to occupy a distant seat.

Elsie felt the less sorry for the latter, as she observed how, like many weak persons, she was really pleasanter in adversity, and throve none the worse for being trampled upon.

Elsie was now to have some new acquaintances. Mrs. Lindsay informed her one morning that she had invited her two dear nieces, Emma and Sophy Dale, to pay her a visit. 'You require companionship, *female* companions of your own age, my love,' said she. 'These two dear girls usually visit me once a year, and I should wish you to become *friends*.'

In reply to her questions, Elsie elicited the facts, that these two girls were members of a numerous family ; that their father, the Reverend Charles Dale, was Aunt Caroline's younger brother ; that he was a curate in a suburb of London ; and that they were very poor, which was entirely

owing to Mr. Dale's having disregarded the advice of his sister and best friend, particularly with reference to his marriage. Some of his elder sons and daughters were now married, and Emma, who was twenty, was the eldest at home, Sophy being two years younger.

As usual, Elsie begged for a personal description of the two she was to meet.

'Emma,' replied Aunt Caroline, 'is not, I confess, a young person who is very attractive to me. Still, dear girl, she fulfils her home duties as well as she is able. But I think, Elsie, you will love my dear Sophy. She is a winning young creature,' continued Aunt Caroline fondly, 'frolicsome as a kitten, and with such a loving heart! A little heedless perhaps—you, my Elsie, must strive to use your influence for good, whilst they, I trust, are equally benefiting you. For each of us has our influence, remember that, my love—the unconscious influence of example.'

When the two girls arrived, and Elsie watched the frolicsome Sophy get out of the carriage, she could not help thinking that she herself would be more apt to compare her gambols to those of a young cow than to the kitten to which Aunt Caroline had likened her. Sophy did, indeed, skip gleefully through the hall, and fell with effusion upon the necks of her uncle and aunt, followed by her more sedate sister.

Emma Dale was of middle height, and unremarkable looking. She had sleek dark hair, thin lips, and a sallow complexion.

Sophy was bigger and fairer, with light brown hair, a bright colour, large round greenish-hazel eyes, and rather large hands and feet. Partly from contradiction and partly from a desire to befriend the oppressed, Elsie had been more inclined towards the despised Emma; she watched her with interest, and tried to draw her out. Both girls evidently stood in great awe of their aunt. When in her presence Emma would venture upon no conversation, and only 'Yes, aunt'—'No, aunt'—'Thank you, aunt,' dropped nervously from her lips from time to time. This was not the road to Mrs. Lindsay's favour; and Sophy, who, though

probably not less frightened, was utterly unable to keep from chattering under any circumstances, had a decided advantage over her more cautious sister.

Mrs. Lindsay was in reality very kind to both her nieces, as well as to all her brother's family, whom she had helped in many ways; but she chose to mark the lowered position into which she considered her brother, by his own fault, to have sunk, and therefore made a great show of keeping the girls in their proper place, imposing upon them many curious little rules and restrictions. They were not allowed to sit on arm-chairs or sofas; they might not help themselves to jam or marmalade at breakfast unless it was specially offered to them by their uncle or aunt; and, to train them for home usefulness, they not only sewed for an hour daily in Parkins' room, but Howell was instructed to initiate them into the mysteries of glass and silver cleaning, folding of table-cloths, etc. (William and Herbert, being unmarried, were strictly excluded during these lessons.)

Elsie's position in the house, her fearless manner towards her aunt, and the indulgence with which she was treated, was a matter of great surprise to both the girls. Emma did her best to conceal her astonishment, but met Elsie's advances with a dryness and asperity which drove the latter to take refuge with the more genial Sophy, who had conceived a violent affection for her from the moment she entered the house.

'Do be my friend, Elsie,' she said. 'I should so like to have you for my own particular friend. Emma has plenty of friends, besides you will never get on with her. She said last night that she could not make you out at all, and she thought you gave yourself great airs.'

'You should not repeat things that people say,' said Elsie, rather astonished at this burst of confidence.

'Oh, what does it matter? she would repeat things that I said in a minute. There she is—come this way; let us look as if we were talking about something secret.'

'Why secret?' inquired Elsie.

Sophy, in reply, gave her to understand that Emma's

friends were very particular friends indeed, and that her conferences with them were supposed to be of a dark and mysterious nature; moreover that she, Sophy, saw no reason why she and Elsie should be outdone in this respect.

'If I had *you*,' she added, 'I would not care. Darling Elsie! you are far prettier than any of them—although Emma does say that your hair——'

'Do be quiet!' interrupted Elsie. 'I don't want to hear Emma's remarks about me. Tell me about her friends. Are they not pretty?'

'They are *good*,' said Sophy, nodding her head, 'very good. One of them is an invalid. She never gets off her sofa, except to get into a bath-chair.'

'Poor thing—but is not that very sad?' asked Elsie, rather puzzled at the triumphant tone of Sophy's voice.

'Not at all sad! she would be nothing if she were not an invalid. She is the Heart of the House, like you read of in books. Everybody brings their joys and sorrows and difficulties and things to her. Her name is Grace Eaglefield. Then there is Edith Freeman, whose home is in ——shire,—uncle's relations live quite near it. She is a darling!'

'What is she like?' asked Elsie, suddenly roused to interest.

'Oh, she is very good too, but younger. She is a companion to her father, and a comfort to her mother, and a second mother to all her little brothers and sisters. And they live in such a nice, *dear* old English way, and have such good pork-pies, and she has the most lovely golden hair. It was about hers that Emma said you——'

'Hush!' said Elsie, and just then Emma came up.

'Emma!' cried Sophy, 'just come here and look at Elsie's hair. If it is not as yellow as Edith Freeman's it is twice as thick. Just compare it with your own miserable little knot—and yet you wear a——'

'My hair is very fine,' said Emma, reddening, 'extremely fine. Naturally it goes into very small space. Now I should think that Elsie's——'

'Elsie's is every bit as fine as yours,' interrupted Sophy hotly—'it is like silk.'

'Oh, do leave our hairs alone!' said Elsie. 'Come and let us do the flowers. Hand me that bowl, Sophy,' and Elsie shook the carnations she had just gathered out of her basket.

'Are you allowed to use that bowl?' asked Sophy in an awestruck tone, opening her eyes wide. 'We never were allowed to touch it.'

'Elsie is a prime favourite, that is evident,' said Emma disagreeably.

This was not the first time that Elsie had heard the Freemans mentioned by Emma and Sophy, and knowing that they lived near Alkerton, she secretly took an interest in them, and it must be confessed that the description of Edith's golden hair and domestic virtues began to rankle somewhat unpleasantly in her mind. What right had David to have a pretty and charming neighbour, and yet never even to have mentioned her name to her?

'Yellower, but not so thick,' Elsie said to herself meditatively, as she studied the back of her head with a hand-mirror. 'I wonder, is she really so very pretty? most deceitful of David if she is—but to be sure Sophy talks a heap of nonsense. However, I shall certainly have it out with him when he comes.'

The sisters, in spite of frequent bickerings, were upon the whole affectionate; but Elsie found it difficult to be a friend of the one without being the enemy of the other. However, by being reserved and polite to Emma, she got on with her pretty well; while she treated Sophy, whose devotion to her continued with unabated ardour, with more affection than ceremony. The girls were both eager for excitements of all kinds, yet led perforce a somewhat monotonous life; for their aunt was exceedingly strict with them as regarded visits and parties of pleasure.

'Young people between whom matrimony is impossible had better not associate,' she used to say. They were therefore debarred from many social gatherings in which their souls would have delighted, and, in the absence of

any excitement from without, Sophy's romantic affection for Elsie went through alternate phases of suspicion, jealousy, hope, despair, and a variety of other passions. Elsie unconsciously gave her cause for some of these emotions by her absent manner at times. She was becoming anxious about David; it was now the middle of September, and nothing had been heard of him for some weeks; and as day after day passed and still the post brought no tidings of her lover, she began to have misgivings in spite of herself.

CHAPTER XVI.

'The father cracks of horses, pleughs, and kye,
'The youngster's artless heart o'erflows wi' joy,
But, blate and laithfu', scarce can weel behave ;
'The mother, wi' a woman's wiles, can spy
What makes the youth sae bashfu' and sae grave.'

A VARIETY of causes combined to detain David at Ardvoira, and he was now chafing with impatience to get away. Had it not been for the wise counsels of his friend Ponsonby, there is no saying what rash step he might not have taken.

Ponsonby was some years older than David, and far more a man of the world. He had studied for the bar in early life, and had gone a good deal into society in London. At that time he had met and fallen deeply in love with David's cousin, Rosamond Mortimer, then a beautiful young girl in her first season. Her parents interfered to prevent an engagement, but Ponsonby's affection was fully returned by the young lady herself, with whom he contrived to keep up a correspondence for some time ; and she promised to wait, no matter how long, for him, while he worked to the utmost of his powers in order to realise a sufficient income to maintain a wife in comfort.

The following year he had gone on a walking tour on the Continent with David, just after the latter had passed his preliminary examination for Sandhurst, and on their return to England the first news which met Ponsonby's eye was the announcement in a society paper of a marriage shortly to take place between Sir Roger Seathwaite of Seathwaite Hall, Yorkshire, and Miss Rosamond Mortimer, eldest daughter of Sir Richard and Lady Mary Mortimer,

of Wynchcombe, Devon. The letter which Ponsonby at once wrote to Rosamond was returned to him unopened, and very soon afterwards the marriage took place.

Ponsonby had never taken any real interest in his profession, and after this blow he threw it up in disgust. He went to Rome and studied painting, for which he had considerable talent. Not long afterwards he unexpectedly succeeded to a fortune, which, though not large, might have enabled him to marry, had it come in time. And now he led a wandering and somewhat aimless life. He had met Rosamond several times in society since her marriage; he knew that she was not happy with her husband, who was a man of bad habits and violent temper; and though no actual explanation had ever passed between them, Ponsonby guessed that her marriage had been brought about, not by her own choice, but by the influence, possibly the manoeuvres, of her family. This surmise, however, he never confided to David, who was extremely indignant on his friend's account, and who cherished a bitter grudge against his cousin, although he had seen little of her.

It was not long before Ponsonby drew from David the history of his own love affair, which, indeed, that young man was quite ready to speak about, and also to dilate at great length upon Elsie's charms, and his own difficulties and cares; to all of which his friend listened with praiseworthy patience, but with inward disapproval. He had not a high opinion of David's estimate of women, and was sorry that he had gone too far to recede. He did not for a moment allow himself to suppose that the girl would really wait for David, or that the marriage would ever take place, and thought it kindest, therefore, not to be too encouraging.

'I was a fool, I suppose,' said David, 'to speak when I did, and get her and myself into a row.'

'You were, my dear boy, if you will excuse my saying so, a very complete ass. You have done for yourself all round, it seems to me.'

'Nothing of the sort!' retorted David. 'It is only a matter of time. And as to being such an ass, I would

have been a far greater ass if I had let it alone. Under the circumstances I couldn't have done anything different.'

Ponsonby raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

'You would have done the same yourself, Ponsonby,' pursued David.

'I think not,' replied his friend.

'And now the next thing to be done,' said David, 'the only thing, is to go and get her father to give his consent. He is a cross-grained old chap, as I understand, but you'd think he'd see the thing in a right light when it is put before him.'

Ponsonby was silent for a few moments, while he took out a cigarette and lit it. Then he said, 'I don't want to discourage you, David; I think, under the circumstances, it is the only thing you can do. But don't be surprised if—— well, leave it to time. There is no saying what may happen.'

'No, there isn't. All sorts of confounded things may be happening at this moment, and I kept here, not able to move hand or foot—it's enough to make a saint swear.'

Ponsonby was in no such hurry to leave Ardvoir. The shooting was good, and the party pleasant; and had David been, as usual, full of good humour and overflowing with spirits, he could have stayed on contentedly for weeks. But David in love was not such an agreeable companion as to render a longer sojourn desirable. Both young men, therefore, were glad when the last of the guests had departed, and there was now no absolute need for David to remain; and one morning towards the end of September they set off together, Ponsonby to pay some visits in Perthshire, intending to meet his friend again on his way south after leaving Rossie.

David reached St. Ethernans the same evening, and soon found the Star Hotel, which Elsie, with due forethought, had recommended to him. Here he remained all night, and the next morning after breakfast was eager to set out for Rossie, though half afraid to arrive too early. He passed Aunt Grizel's house, which he recognised from Elsie's description; he even stopped in front of it, but

decided that it would be impossible to intrude upon an old lady at that early hour. After a few minutes of indecision, he set out to walk to Rossie. True, he did not know the way, but he could inquire; it would be better to lose himself than to arrive there inopportunately.

The way for nearly three miles was quite simple, but after passing through the thick wood which lay beyond the moor, the road divided into two branches, and David, after some deliberation, took the wrong turning, though he was now on the Rossie property. He had not proceeded far, before he was aware of a great shouting, hallooing, and barking of dogs; and presently perceived that part of a flock of sheep, which was being driven along the road he had just quitted, had broken away, and that two men were vainly trying to head them.

From his position in front, David saw at once what was needed, and springing over the 'dyke' into the field, he easily managed to turn the foremost stragglers, so that when the men came up they were soon able to restore the escaped sheep to the main body.

This done, David asked whether he was on the right road to Rossie?

'Gang you forrit wi' the sheep, Aang-us,' said one of the men, with a commanding gesture, for he was none other than Sandy Duncan, the Rossie grieve. 'Aweel, sir, gin ye're for Rossie, ye're on the richt enough rod, in *wan* sense. And gin ye're a freend, I wad jist say, gang east 'hrough yon park, it's rael direck. But if ye're no acquaint wi' the faemily, I wad gie ye my advice to turn about an' tak the public rod. Thae deevils has gien us an awfu' dance, as they hev,' he concluded, taking off his hat, and wiping his forehead.

'Are they Captain Ross's sheep?' asked David.

'Ou ay, they're jist some o' wer ain gimmers. Ay! an it hadna been you, I wadna winder but we'd lost wer tren. Gude day t'ye, sir,' and as David was moving off, Sandy once more shouted after him, 'yonder the Laird himsel'! gin ye speir at him he'll maybe gie ye permeesion to gang 'hrough the park.'

The Laird himself! David's heart beat quicker at those words, but taking the bull, so to speak, by the horns, he went straight up to the Laird and accosted him with a friendly smile. 'How do you do, Captain Ross?' said he. 'I have just had the pleasure of turning your sheep.'

The Laird surveyed him from head to foot with a blank countenance.

'I'm obliged to you,' he said at length. 'That shepherd of mine is the greatest idiot that ever drew breath in a body.'

'That is very annoying,' said David. 'But I am glad I met your men, as I had lost my way. I was coming to call upon you, Captain Ross, if you will allow me. My name is David Lindsay.'

'Oh!' said the Laird, eyeing him again—pretty sharply this time. 'You'd better—come in and have some luncheon.'

David was relieved at the turn this last sentence had taken, for there had been a distinct pause in the middle of it, and from the expression of the Laird's countenance, it might have been expected that he was going to suggest that his self-invited guest had better go back to wherever he came from. However, they walked to the house together quite amicably, the Laird responding civilly to David's remarks, but not making any on his own account. David was introduced to Mrs. Ross, who rather embarrassed him by her profuse apologies for the scantiness of the luncheon; and after that meal, he accompanied the Laird to his own den, and sat for a time answering his questions about the farming and sport at Ardvoir, in which his host evinced considerable interest.

David was anxious to speak without delay upon the business which had brought him to Rossie, but on making the attempt to do so the Laird changed the subject so decidedly that he was rather at a loss. At length he rose from his seat. 'It is time for me to go,' he said, 'but I can't do that, Captain Ross, without explaining what I came for.'

The Laird took his pipe from his lips, and examined it.

'I am well enough pleased to see you,' he said, 'if that's all.'

'But it is not all,' said David. 'I didn't come only to pay you a visit, Captain Ross.'

'Oh!' said the Laird grimly. 'I thought you did.'

He waited a moment, glancing furtively at the young man as if to enjoy his discomfiture; then he knocked the ashes out of his pipe and rose also from his seat. 'Where are you stopping?' he asked.

'At the Star Hotel at St. Ethernans,' answered David. 'It seems a good sort of inn.'

'You'd be better here. I'll send for your traps.'

'You are very kind,' said David, colouring with pleasure. 'I shall be most happy——'

'I want the rabbits shot,' interrupted the Laird. 'They're a perfect nuisance. Have you brought your gun?'

David replied in the affirmative.

'You can take a day at them to-morrow.'

When the necessary orders were given, the Laird strolled out with David to 'take a look round the place,' in a spirit of perfect friendliness and concord. He talked about crops and cattle, and behaved to the young man as if his coming were the most natural thing in the world, and a matter of daily occurrence. David could scarcely believe in his own good fortune, and only hoped that his host would soon of his own accord give him an opportunity of speaking on the subject which he had at heart. But Captain Ross gave him no such encouragement. The rabbits occupied them all the next day, and David, being a good shot, found evident favour in the Laird's eyes, for the latter, though a thorough farmer, had in his heart that respect for sport which befits a country gentleman. They were thus apparently on the best of terms, and with his hostess David soon established no less friendly relations.

Euphemia had been rendered very nervous by David Lindsay's sudden appearance, for although she had now become in some degree accustomed to her new position, having received and returned the visits of her neighbours, he was the first stranger who had stayed in the house for

more than an hour or two since her marriage. In return for her many anxious inquiries after his comfort, David tried to talk to her upon other topics, but the conversation invariably came round to housekeeping, and especially to servants, whose ways were a sore trouble and distress to Mrs. Ross. She soon confided to David many domestic perplexities which were altogether beyond the range of his experience; but he, not wishing to be supposed ignorant upon any subject, advised and laid down the law with a gravity of manner which he had picked up from Ponsonby, and which was altogether unnatural to him.

Euphemia's greatest trial at present seemed to be the misconduct of 'tablemaids.'

'Would you believe it, Mr. Lindsay,' she said, 'I have had to part with two gerrls since I came here, and the one I have got now is going away at the term. Two—surely I'm not miscounting. No! Bella Ritchie was the first; she was here when I came. A smart gerrl, I'll not deny, but she gave me impidence the very first day!'

'You don't say so!' said David. 'I am shocked to hear of such conduct.'

Mrs. Ross shook her head and sighed.

'She was an upsetting monkey, but they are all alike, Mr. Lindsay, and that's the truth. You see'—she lowered her voice confidentially—'I'm not acquaint with their ways, and the Captain, he's hasty. But the Captain will not allow of any impidence to me—no, Mr. Lindsay, that's a thing he will not put up with. It just sets him dancing wild, and he gave Bella warning on the spot! The housemaid, Janet Kilgour's not so bad, but then she always needs me at her tail;' and Euphemia sighed again.

'Does she indeed, Mrs. Ross?' said David, rather bewildered.

'You wouldn't believe the trouble I have with her,' answered Euphemia. 'But I hope, Mr. Lindsay, you're comfortable in your room. I saw the sheets aired myself, and although there was a wee bit out of the soap-dish, I thought you'd maybe overlook it.'

David felt flattered by the proof of Mrs. Ross's confidence which this conversation evinced.

It took place in the evening, after the shooting of the rabbits, and was interrupted at length by the Laird's entrance. Euphemia's whole manner then changed; she became silent, and retreating to an arm-chair near the table, she began to smooth out her lilac silk gown, glancing nervously at her husband for approval.

When first they were married she had annoyed the Laird by her humility and retiring manner, and he had been at some pains to direct her as to her behaviour. He had strictly forbidden her to sit upon anything smaller than an easy-chair, or to go to the kitchen for what she wanted instead of ringing the bell; and, as she herself had told David, was particular that the servants should pay her proper respect. But somehow, poor Euphemia always managed to say and do the wrong thing, partly from nervousness, though her husband, considering his temper, showed wonderful patience and forbearance with her.

The next morning, at breakfast, Euphemia, emboldened by the cheerfulness of her guest, became quite lively and chatty; the Laird, on the contrary, appeared somewhat morose.

It was a brilliant autumn morning, and David hazarded a remark that it was fine weather for the harvest. The Laird only grunted discontentedly in reply, so his wife hastened to answer for him.

'I am sure, Mr. Lindsay, it is that, and although the turnips may be needing a drop of rain, we cannot control the weather. It's a fine thing to have a cheerful spirit. Is the tea to your liking, Captain? Take a wee drop more cream to yourself now.'

'No, thank you,' said the Laird shortly.

'What excellent tea yours is, Mrs. Ross,' said David.

'Indeed, Mr. Lindsay, I am very proud you like it. The Captain is just extraordinary partial to it, are you not, Captain?'

'No,' said the Laird.

Euphemia twisted her hands and smiled. 'Oh dear,

dear !' said she. ' You've surely risen on your wrong side this morning. This very chest of tea, Mr. Lindsay,' she resumed, ' if you'll believe me, was sent home by my youngest brother Alick from India ; he's what they call a tea-planter out there. They say it's a kind of shrub it grows on, but you'll know, Mr. Lindsay, being an Injun yourself. There's surely nothing wrong with your egg, Captain ?' her voice taking a high note of alarm, as the Laird pushed away his egg untasted. ' It's really a pity to boil the eggs if you're not to eat them, when they're getting scarce with the hens moulting, poor things, and that bare, some of them, they're fair indelicate to look upon. But your egg's quite good if you'll only try'—drawing the rejected egg towards her for examination.

' Let it alone, will you !' growled the Laird. ' It's perfectly rotten ;' and hastily finishing his breakfast, he strode out of the room and banged the door.

' It's a pity he's so cankered to-day,' observed Euphemia mournfully, still looking towards the door. ' It's just sometimes, Mr. Lindsay, and I think it's his stomnick. He's terribly bawthered with his stomnick, and that's the truth. But don't let him put you from the eggs, for they're really very fine.'

When his hostess had gone to her household duties, David strolled out at the front-door, and stood in the sunshine smoking thoughtfully, and considering what he had better do next. It was all very well to have come here to stay with Elsie's father, and apparently to enjoy his favour ; but it seemed to him that he was no nearer the object of his coming than at first. Some explanation must be arrived at ; but to-day, if the Laird were really indisposed, perhaps it would be injudicious to hasten matters. As he stood musing, Elsie's many loving descriptions of her old home came into his mind, and he looked round him, to try and verify them with his own eyes.

Certainly the place looked pleasant enough on that sunny morning, for autumn is the time when Scotland looks her best. There had been an early touch of frost, and the air, though still, was pleasantly bracing, and full of the

fresh smell of the sea. The grass, where it was shaded from the sun, was still white with dew and threaded with gossamers; the rowan trees hung red with berries; and the robins were twittering their autumn songs from every bush and shrub. A late grasshopper or two were audibly enjoying the sunshine; and from more than one distant harvest-field the reaping-machines, sounding like magnified grasshoppers, were busily at work.

A heavy footstep was heard on the gravel, and the Laird made his appearance.

‘I am going to the barley-field,’ said he.

David walked beside him in silence, reflecting the while that he might as well go and see Aunt Grizel that day. He had promised Elsie to make her acquaintance, and in her he might perhaps find an ally and supporter.

Accordingly, he intimated his intention of calling on the old lady that afternoon.

‘Eh? I didn’t know you knew her,’ said the Laird.

‘I haven’t made her acquaintance yet,’ replied David; ‘but I ought to, being a—a connection, you know, and in the neighbourhood.’

‘She has got plenty of acquaintances, and connections too,’ said the Laird, suspiciously. ‘It’s not likely she’ll want new ones, at her time of life. But please yourself. You can take the pony if you like.’

‘Thank you very much, Laird,’ said David, ‘but I think I’ll walk.’

Miss Grizel received David Lindsay with formal politeness, but her manner became more gracious as soon as she fully understood who he was. He explained to her for what object he had come, and how he had been received at Rossie, and candidly asked her advice. This pleased the old lady, who liked to look upon a handsome young face; she thought him ‘a fine open lad,’ and her sympathies were soon enlisted on behalf of the young lovers. Still, she would not give David too much encouragement, and only advised him to tell the Laird everything, and trust to time.

The interview was long, and when it was over David

did some other errands in St. Ethernans, and returned to Rossie in time for dinner.

In the smoking-room that evening, while he was meditating how to begin the attack, which he was determined should come off that night, the Laird anticipated him by plunging directly into the subject.

'I understand that you had some confounded—some purpose in coming here?'

'My purpose,' replied David, rising and standing with his back against the mantelpiece, 'is connected with your daughter. I came here to ask your consent to marry her.'

'You have spoken to her, have you?'

'Yes,' said David, 'I have spoken to her, and I assure you that her happiness, as well as mine, is involved——'

'You are talking nonsense. Can you keep a wife? for I don't see what you're to keep her upon.'

David hesitated a little. 'At present, certainly,' he said, 'I couldn't very well, without help, support a wife in comfort; but if I once had your consent, all that might be easily arranged.'

'What is the use of talking in riddles?' growled the Laird. 'Who the deuce do you expect help from, and what are your expectations?'

'General Lindsay has told me plainly that he intends to make me his heir. This, of course, is in confidence, Laird, and I think he would be quite ready to help me now, provided I married Elsie. Then there is Ardvoir, as you know.'

'A very small property,' said the Laird. 'What is the old man's age?'

'Eighty-six,' said David shortly. 'He's a fine, hale old gentleman.'

'Hum!' said the Laird. 'There'd be the wife's jointure to come off it—same with the General. You don't mention Corinzean?'

'I did not mention Corinzean,' answered David, 'because the young fellow, the Master, may live as long as I do—though to be sure he's an invalid. But it's not a thing I have any right to count upon.'

'I wonder at that,' observed the Laird sarcastically, 'since you and Elsie seem to do nothing else but wait for dead men's shoes. But whoever marries her needn't expect much. Her mother's money is just £2000, and it doesn't do more than keep her in clothes. I don't know what she does with them all, to be sure—it's her business.'

There was silence for a little while, after which David said, 'Then, Laird, you have no objection to our engagement, provided I can furnish enough to keep Elsie in comfort?'

'Objections?' said the Laird, 'of course I have objections. Why, the girl doesn't know her own mind. Do you mean to say she wants to go out to India with you?'

'Yes,' said David. 'Certainly she does.'

'She's a fool,' said the Laird. 'She wouldn't keep her health there a month.' And, laying aside his pipe, he took up a newspaper and read, as if determined to put a stop to further conversation. David meanwhile considered what argument he should next employ, while appearing deeply engrossed in the pages of the *North British Agriculturist*.

After a long interval the Laird put down his paper, refilled his pipe, and demanded abruptly, 'What on earth do you want, a young chap like you, lading yourself with a wife? Marriage plays the very mischief with a man; it's the greatest mistake he can commit. No man should marry till he is forty, and he is better to leave it alone then.'

David laughed. 'It is too late to give me that advice now, Laird,' said he. 'If I waited to ask Elsie till I was forty, she might have taken some other fellow meanwhile.'

'You had no business to ask her at all, when you are not in a position to marry her.'

David thought it more prudent to make no answer, and the Laird sat awhile watching him furtively from under his shaggy eyebrows.

'I don't know what you think you see in Elsie,' he said presently. 'She's a—a washed-out thing. I don't suppose

any one would call her good-looking?' this with a slightly questioning inflection, as though he would rather like to be contradicted.

But the young man frowned ; the remark did not please him. 'I don't want anybody to call her good-looking,' he answered very curtly.

'I suppose you have the sense to see for yourself that you can't marry just now, at any rate,' said the Laird. 'You must just go back to India and take your chance. If I thought the girl would make herself miserable about you—but I scarcely think that's possible,' and he eyed David disparagingly. 'What do your own people say to it?'

'My mother has not seen Elsie yet, and your consent was the first thing to be obtained. As to my stepfather I am not responsible to him in any way.'

'You expect nothing from your stepfather, then?'

'Certainly not ; I am quite independent of him. If he provides for anybody it will be for my brother.'

'There is no objection, then, on their part?'

'I am sure there will be none when once I bring Elsie to see my mother.'

'That's as much as to say she has objections now. Why, God bless my soul, young man!' said the Laird, bringing his hand down on the table with some violence, 'there's no occasion for the girl to go where she's not wanted. She could always come home, for the matter of that.'

'She shall be made welcome wherever she goes, if you trust her to me,' said David. 'This then is clear, Captain Ross—if I obtain the necessary means, and my mother's full consent, you don't withhold yours. I shall go south to-morrow, and——'

'Wait a minute,' said the Laird.

Then followed a discussion of the amount required to maintain a wife, on which subject there was considerable difference of opinion. David's proposal to marry upon £500 a year was scornfully rejected by the Laird, who intimated that £800 was the smallest possible income he

could for a moment bring himself to contemplate. 'Not that you'll get even that just now,' he said, 'but I suppose you can wait a year or two, if you're bent on making fools of yourselves.'

Euphemia had naturally had her suspicions as to the causes which had brought David Lindsay to Rossie, and though she had no knowledge of the facts (for the Laird never, if he could help it, talked to a woman on any subject of importance), had nevertheless made a pretty correct conjecture, and was overflowing with curiosity. She ventured to ask David a few leading questions about her stepdaughter, having found out that he had been staying at Chippingham.

She supposed that Elsie had become a very grand young lady now? she had heard that her uncle, General Lindsay, was a wealthy gentleman. Did not Mr. Lindsay think her a beautiful gerrl? so genteel!

David admitted that he did.

'And yet so simple,' continued Euphemia, 'and so affaionate! Such pretty letters as she writes me! Eh! I hope she'll get a nice husband.'

But David did not gratify her curiosity, and finding him impenetrably reserved upon this subject, Euphemia went to confide her surmises to Marjorie, with whom she was on familiar terms, although it was only on the rather rare occasions when Marjorie was in a good humour that the latter condescended to gossip with her mistress.

'I'll wager, Marjorie, there'll be a wedding in the family some of these days. You'll see that young gentleman has not come here for nothing.'

'Ay?' said Marjorie. 'Will he be coortin' Miss Elsie?'

'Oh, I've no reason to say so, but I can put two and two together, and I think it. I just mentioned her name to him, to see what he would say, and although he's very discreet, and answered me as mim and as prim—he turned as red as fire all over,'—which was a slight departure from exact truth, but had the effect of fully arousing Marjorie's interest.

'Ay?' she said again. 'I wouldna winder. Aweel, he's a wise-like lad, and the Captain's rael ta'en up wi' him.'

'And what a handsome gentleman!' exclaimed Euphemia.

'Eh, Marjorie! what a noble presence!'

'He's no ill to look upon,' replied the less enthusiastic Marjorie. 'Miss Elsie will have nae need to think shame for him, for that maitter, if his inward pairts be conforming.'

'D'ye think the Captain's very fond of his daughter, Marjorie?' inquired Euphemia.

'Ay is he!' was the emphatic reply, 'I'se warrant he thinks there's few can compare with her.'

Euphemia's countenance fell, for there was a lurking jealousy of Elsie in her heart, and she would have liked to suppose that her husband did not care for his daughter in the least. She sighed wearily, and, as Marjorie did not seem disposed for further conversation, she left the kitchen far less briskly than she had entered it.

Thus David, having won favour at Rossie from all whose good opinion was worth cultivating, left the place well satisfied, on the whole, with his reception.

CHAPTER XVII.

'Thou hast never in thy life
Show'd thy dear mother any courtesy ;
When she (poor hen !) fond of no second brood,
Has cluck'd thee to the wars, and safely home,
Loaden with honour.'

LADY ELEANOR FITZGERALD had an afternoon in the week on which she received company. It was a penance, she used to tell her intimate friends, and really she thought it right to practice some sort of penance. Some people go to church on saints' days, and some people eat fish on Fridays, and, if they found themselves the better for it, she saw no reason why they should not. But, for her part, she would receive company on Thursdays, and do her duty to the neighbourhood, however much it bored her.

On one particularly wet Thursday afternoon in October, Lady Eleanor was sitting, beautifully dressed and very gracious, listening to the conversation of the Reverend Cecil Beaumont, a young curate, who was the only visitor as yet announced.

'Yes, a great change,' said Mr. Beaumont, who had but lately come to the neighbourhood. 'At Gastown, where my late curacy was, I had the entire charge of six thousand souls. It is a great responsibility.'

'Oh, but you could not be really responsible for their *souls*, could you?' said Lady Eleanor. 'Still, it must have been a dreadful wear and tear. Then you like this better?'

The curate was proceeding to explain how he actually was responsible for the souls of his former congregation, for which charge he felt himself quite competent, and did not

mind it in the least, when the door opened, and another young man walked in unannounced.

'My dear David,' said Lady Eleanor, rising, 'where have you come from? Let me introduce you to Mr. Beaumont. My son, Mr. Lindsay. Have you just come from Scotland?'

David did not look quite pleased at finding a stranger there, but Mr. Beaumont did not seem to think it at all necessary to cut his visit short; and when the bell rang again, and Mrs. and Miss Freeman were announced, David looked reproachfully at his mother and sighed. She, however, received her visitors with the most unruffled sweetness, and began to talk to Mrs. Freeman, while Mr. Beaumont, seating himself by Miss Edith, began a conversation which was evidently highly interesting to that young lady.

David now meditated an escape, which, however, the entrance of tea prevented, as he felt it incumbent on him to hand the cups, and, as more and more visitors poured in, his impatience increased. He knew no one besides the Freemans; so, taking advantage of Mr. Beaumont's temporary absence, David seated himself by Edith, and drew her attention to the curate, who was benevolently supplying the wants of a deaf old lady, and vainly trying to find out whether she took sugar or not. The old lady had an ear-trumpet, of which she had given Mr. Beaumont the wrong end, and was impatiently waiting, with head turned away and the mouthpiece to her ear, for the expected communication. Edith giggled and blushed, and put on so many little airs that David wondered where such a young country-bred girl could have acquired them all; inwardly comparing her fluttering, affected manner with Elsie's perfect composure and simplicity. However, he found Edith sufficiently amusing to talk to; and when Mr. Beaumont came back he still took a pleasure in keeping the place he had usurped, and watching the curate's blank and rather astonished look when he found that the young lady had no longer a word or a glance to bestow upon him. He was a good-looking, even a handsome man, this same

Mr. Beaumont, and Edith had a very genuine appreciation of him; but she thought a little flirtation with David Lindsay would do her admirer no harm, while it afforded pleasing pastime for herself.

David's retribution came, however, when many of the guests departed, and the curate with them, but the Freemans still sat on. He could not shake himself free of Edith, who wearied him with her silly little speeches and grimaces; he began even to think her ugly, and to wonder whether any girl had ever had such large fat cheeks before; and when they had at last taken leave he demanded of his mother, with more irritation than he usually displayed, what could induce her to have all those infernal people calling at the same time?

'My dear, how could I know you were coming to-day? If you don't even take the trouble to write a line. Where have you been, David? Have you come from Ardvoira, or where?'

'From Ardvoira, no!' said David. 'I had to stay a tremendous time there, though. I came from Chippingham to-day.'

'From Chippingham? What were you doing there?'

'Ratifying my engagement, as Aunt Caroline calls it,' said David, with a half-embarrassed laugh. 'I went to Rossie, mother—I wrote you that, you know—and the old Laird there is quite agreeable, conditionally, of course, and all that.'

Lady Eleanor was indignant.

'I wonder, David, I really wonder how you can be so undutiful and unfeeling! I don't expect much feeling or much consideration from you—I never have.'

'I don't know why you shouldn't,' put in David *sotto voce*.

'But that you should go and do the exact opposite of all I wished, after I've planned and considered and had sleepless nights for years thinking about your future, is a little too much even for me to bear! And now you come and coolly tell me about it, as if you had done something rather clever!'

'Mother dear, I didn't want you to have sleepless

nights——’ began David ; but Lady Eleanor was not to be pacified.

‘No!’ she said ; ‘do not touch me or come near me, it is mere hypocrisy. You have behaved disgracefully, and if you marry that girl I will never forgive you. So now do as you like.’

David went away, deeply hurt and mortified, and although the afternoon was closing in, and the rain was falling heavily, he walked out without either greatcoat or umbrella, feeling himself an ill-used martyr, and rather pleased than otherwise at getting wet. After he had walked a mile or two, however, his conscience told him that his mother’s reproaches were not altogether unjust, and that he had certainly not treated her as she was accustomed to be treated. In his eagerness to win Elsie he had passed his mother over, dealing first with the obstacles which seemed to him most formidable, and fancying that her consent would be easily gained, and that she might be talked over at any time. He had sent her short and hasty notes in answer to her letters, or else had not written at all ; and on leaving Rossie he had gone straight to Chippingham, taking Ponsonby with him, without giving her an idea where he was to be found.

He might have stayed on at the Elms indefinitely, in the joy of his reunion with the object of his affections, had not Mrs. Lindsay had the good sense to dismiss him somewhat peremptorily as soon as she found out that Lady Eleanor had not yet been consulted. Still, both David and Elsie had a good deal to go through from Aunt Caroline, whose sympathy with them had taken the form of moral exhortations of a distressingly public nature, mingled with tears and blessings. The General, too, who, unhappily for them, had once met the lovers going out for a walk, was always pointing to the river and saying, ‘Doun the burn, Davie.’ It was his one joke, and he never tired of it, but repeated it daily, and sometimes two or three times a day, chuckling with delight at his own wit. All this, however, David had endured for his love’s sake with surprising fortitude, suppressing his inward irritation till he reached home, and then venting it upon

his mother, which certainly was neither reasonable nor wise.

David returned home in a very proper frame of mind, seeing his fault and desirous of making amends ; but Lady Eleanor had said too much in her anger to be quickly reconciled again. She would hardly speak to her son all that evening, and averted her eyes and curled her nose whenever David approached, as if he were some loathsome sight. It was vain to look for any sort of sympathy from Mr. Fitzgerald, *he* did not even perceive that there was anything amiss, but was anxious to have his stepson's opinion upon some sherry which he had just got. David did not like it and said so, and Mr. Fitzgerald then held forth at some length upon the evils of smoking, with which young men of the present day vitiate their tastes and destroy their digestions.

Lionel had gone to Oxford. Had he been at home things might have been better, but David had never got on with his mother as Lionel did, and did not understand her so well. Until lately, David had thought little about understanding any one ; he had found the world and the people in it pleasant, in his careless, happy-go-lucky way, and his affections had never been very strongly called out. He was very fond of his mother and of Lionel, but he knew that they were almost sufficient to one another, while he was a less favoured third. This he had always accepted quietly and without the least resentment ; but when he fell in love with Elsie it was a revelation to him, and he began to discern many things which had never before entered his head. He began to see with Elsie's eyes, and to feel keenly things which he would have left unnoticed but for the thought of her. As he sat in the evening pretending to read, but in reality watching his mother as she turned over the pages of her novel, it occurred to him for the first time that if he could not marry Elsie at once and take her out to India with him, her life at home might be very disagreeable, supposing she did not get on with his mother. This was an alarming thought, but it was quite possible that she might not. He had looked upon Alkerton as a

place where Elsie might take refuge at any time when she got tired of Aunt Caroline, and he now began to see that he had been decidedly too rash in his conclusions. His mother was in reality neither obstinate nor unforgiving, but David only looked at the outside just then.

Lady Eleanor possessed the kind of beauty which is almost more striking in a middle-aged woman than in a girl, so classically perfect were her features, and so graceful every line of her figure, which time had only made more rounded and more stately. She had more expression in her face than perhaps really belonged to her character, and there was often a melancholy earnestness in her gaze which was not indicative of anything in particular. A poetical or imaginative mind might have seen all manner of deep and pathetic meanings in her dark beautiful eyes and in the perfect curves of her lips; David, who was not poetical, merely thought that his mother looked rather out of temper, and that she was not at all the kind of person calculated to set a timid girl at her ease; moreover, she showed no signs whatever of relenting towards him.

David's night's rest was greatly disturbed by these reflections, nor did the situation appear much more hopeful in the morning. However, his natural cheerfulness prevailed, and he began to comfort himself by thinking that his mother's ill humour had probably passed away, or if not, that it would in time. He resolved to make amends to her by his agreeable behaviour. 'What's the use of pulling a long face?' thought he; and in a determinedly cheerful manner he began to whistle scraps of various melodies, as was his usual custom while dressing. Lionel was wont to say that his brother's whistling drove him distracted, and that he whistled out of tune; but then Lionel was rather proud of his sensitive ear, and David did not allow himself to be in the least influenced by this criticism.

He came down rather late to find Mr. Fitzgerald sitting alone at breakfast, and inquired where his mother was.

'She has heard that your brother Lionel is ill,' answered Mr. Fitzgerald in a resigned voice, 'and it seems she cannot eat her breakfast. I do wish, David, that *some* of your

family would learn to shut the door. Your mother has just left it open, and you know that to eat while sitting in a draught is most pernicious.'

Lady Eleanor presently returned, looking so pale and anxious that David's heart smote him. He greeted her affectionately, and asked for particulars about his brother. Lionel did not seem to be very ill, but he was suffering from an attack of low fever, and it was impossible to bring him home or even to remove him in his present state. Lady Eleanor was undecided what to do, as she knew she was of little use as a nurse, and yet she could not bear the suspense of being away from him.

David at once volunteered to go and look after Lionel, which would both please his mother and be a relief to his own mind. He promised to take the very best care of his brother, and send daily bulletins. To this Lady Eleanor consented gladly, even saying it was a mercy David arrived when he did, and that he was the only person she could have trusted to send. She hovered about him anxiously whilst he prepared for his journey, suggesting that he should take with him all manner of curious and unlikely articles of food for the use of the patient.

'And be sure you write every day, David, and send for me at once if he should be worse.'

'Yes, yes, I will,' said David, 'but cheer up, mother, depend upon it he is not so bad as all that. And, mother,' stopping her as she was going out of the room, 'I am sorry if I annoyed you that time. Of course I ought to have written oftener. But you are not put out with me now, are you?'

Lady Eleanor looked at him blankly for a minute, as if not quite knowing what he meant, then she pulled her hand out of his and turned away half angrily.

'It is very hard, it is enough to break any one's heart, to have sons like mine. There is Lionel, who never disobeyed me, dying, most likely, at that detestable place, and you, who never do a single thing I ask you——' Here Lady Eleanor broke off and began to sob, to David's great concern and alarm, for he had seldom seen his mother in

tears, and did not, as Lionel would have done, at once jump to the conclusion that it was entirely because she had had no breakfast.

'Mother,' said David, 'for heaven's sake don't do that. I can't help being well and Lionel ill, you know (I don't believe there is much the matter with him either), and I never disobeyed you but once, and that's done now, and what's the use of going on about it? You would not have me go back to Elsie and say I had changed my mind, would you?'

'It would be better if I were dead and in my grave,' said Lady Eleanor, 'and then my children could marry as many beggars as they choose.'

She dried her eyes and left the room, and when David next saw her she was so much more cordial that he again ventured to plead his cause, this time with more success.

'Oh! David, don't tease me about it,' she said. 'How can I think about such things with Lionel perhaps in danger? but—yes—very well, I'll see the girl since you are so set on it, and if she is a lady and all that——'

'Of course she is a lady,' interrupted David hotly. 'Do you suppose I don't know a lady when I see one?'

'I don't know,' said his mother, 'many young men do not.'

'Well, you will like her when you see her; she is quite different from other girls—not like the girl you had here yesterday, you know.'

'Which girl? The one you flirted so much with?'

'I never flirt,' said David solemnly. He gazed fixedly at his boots and apparently found an idea in them, for he said with a complete change of manner—

'Mother, my ring—you have it, you know; will you give it to me now?'

'What ring?'

'The ring my godmother, old Lady Corinzean, left me, and that you said you would keep for my wife.'

'And you would give it to Elsie Ross? Ridiculous!'

'Yes, certainly; for no one else shall be my wife. Please give it to me, mother.'

'I shall do nothing of the sort.'

'But it is my own,' said David.

'David, I am perfectly disgusted with you! So *grasping*, that is what I dislike. It was your disposition from a baby. It is time the dogcart came round.' She glanced nervously at the clock.

'It won't be round for five minutes,' said David. 'Do give me my ring, mother, it would not be much trouble.'

Lady Eleanor, sighing, went to her room, followed by her son. She unlocked her dressing-case and took out an old-fashioned diamond ring, quaintly set, and made to fit a very slender finger. 'You will have to get it enlarged and it will spoil the setting,' she observed despondently, as she gave it to David without looking at it.

David regarded it with complacency, and put it in his waistcoat pocket with great care. 'I should say it would just about fit,' said he.

'I wish Lady Corinzean had never left it to you, David,' said Lady Eleanor. 'Nothing brings good fortune that comes from Corinzean.'

'Mother, are *you* superstitious?' said David. 'I would not have believed it of you.'

He took a very affectionate leave of her,—let us do him the justice to say he would have done so in any case,—and departed, promising to send the very earliest report of Lionel's state of health.

CHAPTER XVIII.

'And but he's something stain'd
With grief, that's beauty's canker, thou might'st call him
A goodly person.'

ELSIE, meanwhile, was leading a very happy and cheerful life at Chippingham. She had seen her lover again, and was allowed to correspond with him. Her engagement was sanctioned by her father and her Aunt Caroline, and she felt quite peaceful and at rest from anxiety. David's visit had been brief, and Elsie, now that their engagement was public, and their behaviour the theme of every one's conversation, had become so shy with her lover, that he found their interview somewhat unsatisfactory at first. But this wore off, and in the long uninterrupted talk which Aunt Caroline was so careful they should have, they learnt to know more of each other's characters and thoughts.

Ponsonby soon became a great favourite at the Elms, especially with Mrs. Lindsay. The General, although he found him a pleasant enough companion, said he was 'a queer foreign sort of chap,' by which he probably meant to express a certain inward contempt, or at least disapproval, of a man who spent his time in painting pictures, travelling in foreign countries, and learning many languages, when he might easily settle down in his own country, devote himself to field sports, and become a justice of the peace. Mrs. Lindsay did not, any more than her husband, approve of the foreign countries, which were either Mahometan or (still worse) Popish, yet she was charmed by Ponsonby's extreme courtesy and attention to herself. She admired the intellect which beamed from his eye, and the artistic

feeling which she perceived to reside in the points of his long supple fingers.

Ponsonby was less tall than David Lindsay, and much more slightly made. He was dark in complexion and rather foreign looking, not handsome, and yet there was a picturesque and even tragic air about him which caused him to be a good deal admired by ladies, with whom his particularly unassuming and polite manners also helped to render him very popular.

Even to his friend there was not, in public at least, any of the easy familiarity of address which David employed towards him. David had various appellations for him, according to circumstances, and he answered to them all. Sometimes, but rarely, he was 'Ponsonby,' generally 'Tommy' or 'Alphonso,' although in truth the name he had received at his baptism was neither Alphonso nor Thomas, but the very ordinary and harmless one of William.

Mrs. Lindsay was fond of holding long conversations with Ponsonby on religious questions, and although she could never quite find out what particular creed Mr. Ponsonby professed, she saw in him a deeply religious nature and an ardent desire for enlightenment. Together they deplored the world and its corruptions, and this was not hypocrisy on Ponsonby's part; for, though he listened partly out of deference, he had an unaffectedly serious turn of mind. Besides, he really liked the old lady. He was, like herself, a student of human character, and Mrs. Lindsay's eccentricities were a source of unfailing delight to him.

There was only one person in the house who, although she could not help liking him, could not get over a latent suspicion of Mr. Ponsonby, and that was Miss Maynard. She had heard somehow that he had been educated abroad, and was in some way mixed up with a Jesuit college. It was not perfectly clear to the good lady whether he had actually studied at this establishment, or whether he only lived in the same street, but, at all events, the proximity was very dangerous, and she could not rid herself of the idea that he might possibly be a Jesuit in disguise. She had hinted these suspicions to Mrs. Lindsay, by whom she

had been distinctly snubbed, and reproved for uncharitableness ; still (as she afterwards told Elsie in confidence), she felt like one who saw her dearest friend walking blindfolded on the brink of a precipice, and dared not cry out, lest she should impel her to rush forward to her destruction. She implored Elsie never to become a 'pervert,' nor to allow David to become one, and not to be deceived by the outward gloss of their friend's manner, for Jesuits, she had been told, are always polished and agreeable. Elsie in vain assured her that Ponsonby was not even a Roman Catholic, for had he not listened calmly whilst Aunt Caroline denounced the errors of that faith? and had he not gone to church with her every Sunday? But Miss Maynard only shook her head and sighed, and said that in their system the end justified the means, and that a short walk barefoot was held to be a sufficient atonement for a long course of deception and fraud. Miss Maynard was not so much alarmed for her two young cousins, Emma and Sophy, as Mr. Ponsonby evidently preferred Elsie's society to theirs ; still she thought it right to give them a warning against the wiles of Jesuitism, which was not without its effect upon those young damsels' minds. They were quite puzzled by Mr. Ponsonby, and did not know whether to like him or not, he was so different from the young men of their acquaintance. Sophy, indeed, declared that she perceived a 'deadly fascination' about him, and that the cold glitter of his eye caused her to shudder from head to foot ; but Emma, who was less imaginative, did not profess to experience these sensations, and only stood rather in awe of Mr. Ponsonby, whom she did not dare to fall in love with, as she might have done with another young man in the same circumstances.

Ponsonby liked what he saw of Elsie, and praised her to David's heart's content, while telling his friend that it was merely his usual good luck which had thrown Elsie in his way, and that he need not take any credit to himself for a knowledge of human nature which he did not possess.

When Mrs. Lindsay discovered that David had not properly acquainted his mother with his engagement, she was

extremely shocked and agitated, and commanded the undutiful son to go home the next day. Ponsonby, who was making a water-colour painting of a spot some miles up the river, where the autumn tints were especially beautiful, was earnestly entreated to remain and finish it. In another fortnight the Elms party would be broken up, Emma and Sophy returning home, and the other members, namely, the General and Mrs. Lindsay, Miss Maynard, Elsie, Howell, William, Parkins, the three dogs, and Trotter, with the carriage and horses, would all migrate to St. Leonards for change of air.

An annual visit to the seaside during the fall of the leaf was considered essential to health by the inhabitants of Chippingham; at which time a great beating of carpets and sweeping of chimneys prevailed in the neighbourhood. Elsie, once observing these proceedings at the house of a neighbour, spoke of them casually as the 'autumn house-cleaning,' as distinguished from the 'spring cleaning,' customary in her country; but her remark was received with such evident disapproval that she never again ventured to allude to the subject. Mrs. Lindsay and Miss Maynard smiled indulgently, indeed, while they shook their heads, as who should say, 'Dear, ingenuous child!' but the cleaning of a house was manifestly regarded as rather an improper subject, not to be mentioned before gentlemen.

The lovers found time for a long talk on the morning of David's departure. Elsie was very apprehensive lest his relations should disapprove of her.

'Tell me what your mother is like, David. Shall I be afraid of her or not?'

'Afraid? oh no! there is nothing to be afraid of,' said David. 'She is a very good woman, and if she once takes to you, which she is certain to do, you will get on with her like a house on fire.'

'By good do you mean religious?' inquired Elsie.

'Well, she is religious,' said David thoughtfully; 'yes, decidedly, I should say; she is always talking about principle, but religion is not her forte exactly, you know. She is not like Aunt Caroline,' he added with a laugh. 'But

you have no reason to be afraid of her, my Elsie ; her bark is worse than her bite.'

With this vague description Elsie was obliged to be content ; but inwardly she was sorry to hear Lady Eleanor 'barked' at all, it did not sound encouraging.

'I am afraid you ought to have gone home sooner, David, I have kept you away from your mother for so long, she will not be pleased at that.'

'Oh, she won't mind,' said David ; 'she has got Lionel. At least she had before he went to Oxford.'

'But Lionel is not home from India on leave.'

'No, but you must know, Elsie,' and David turned to her very seriously, 'it is a very extraordinary and curious thing—I can't account for it myself—but my mother actually prefers Lionel to me !'

If Elsie was utterly astounded by this statement, she, at all events, kept her wonder to herself, and the two fell to wondering when they would meet again. David said he would take a run to St. Leonards as soon as they were settled there, and, in the meantime, he was glad that Ponsonby was staying on at the Elms.

'He is a real good fellow, Elsie, and one that is to be trusted, though he does humbug Aunt Caroline a little. I should not have thought Ponsonby was much in her line,' he continued meditatively ; 'he is not a marrying man, you understand.'

'Why not?' asked Elsie. 'Hasn't he any money?'

'Money is always the first thing women think of,' observed David severely. 'No, that is not the reason. He had a disappointment in his youth.'

Ponsonby was now thirty, which David looked upon as rather an advanced age.

'Ah, poor man !' said Elsie feelingly, 'is that the reason he looks so melancholy, David? And what happened to him?'

David laughed at this idea. 'He doesn't look melancholy, bless you ! it's the way his moustache grows. He does it because he thinks it makes him look like a Van Dyck. He's an awfully vain fellow. Oh, he has got over his disappointment now, I hope ; but the young woman

behaved very badly to him, and I don't suppose he would care to have anything to do with women again, although he makes pretty speeches and that, no end. There isn't a greater humbug living.'

'David, I think it is very unkind of you to take away your friend's character behind his back. *I* think him extremely nice.'

'My darling, I only want to warn you, because you don't know the world, you are so young. You might naturally think, when a fellow pays you all kinds of compliments, that he means something, whereas, you know, it is just his way of speaking.'

'Nonsense, David! I should not think he meant anything; besides, he has not even paid me any. Tell me about the girl who behaved badly.'

'The girl,' said David, 'was, I am sorry to say, a cousin of mine, Rose Mortimer. She was engaged to Ponsonby, —would be engaged, for her parents did not wish it,—and when it came to the point she threw him over without a word of explanation, and married a rich Yorkshire baronet, whom she could not have cared a straw about. I hear he leads her an awful life now, and it serves her jolly well right,' he concluded vindictively.

'Then both their lives are spoilt—what a sad thing!' said Elsie. 'Do you know her well, David?'

'I knew her when I was a boy; I never saw her after she was grown up. She was a nice girl then, and awfully pretty, but she changed, I suppose. If I thought *you* would ever change to me, Elsie'—and so the pair talked on, exchanging vows of unalterable fidelity, until they were called in by Aunt Caroline, and David had to make his adieux hastily, and start off to catch the train.

A day or two later David wrote from Oxford, where he had gone to nurse his brother Lionel through an illness, which, though never severe, proved to be rather tedious. The doctors prescribed sea-air for the patient as soon as he was well enough to be moved, and no health resort seemed to David so desirable in every respect as St. Leonards, where he hoped soon to join the party from the Elms.

CHAPTER XIX.

'Vain is the hope, by any force or skill
To stem the current of a woman's will ;
For if she will, she will, you may depend on't,
And if she won't, she won't, and there's an end on't.'

ABOUT a week after David's departure the household at the Elms was once more thrown into a state of agitation by the news that Canon Gosset, a somewhat celebrated preacher, was about to arrive at the Rectory, and would deliver a missionary sermon in Chippingham parish church the following Sunday afternoon. Ernest Maynard was now hardly ever mentioned, having dropped entirely out of Aunt Caroline's favour. Within a fortnight after his rejection by Mrs. Lindsay on behalf of her niece, he had proposed to the sister of his friend Mr. Talmud Brooks, and been accepted. The marriage was to take place almost immediately; and Mrs. Lindsay, though she sent a handsome wedding-present to the bride, treated her former favourite with marked coldness, and was determined that her stay at St. Leonards should be prolonged till after the arrival of the newly-married couple at their home.

The news of Canon Gosset's advent caused the greatest excitement to Mrs. Lindsay, Miss Maynard, and the Dales, and many were the speculations as to whether the holy man would have fair weather for his journey, how much luggage he would bring, and whether or not his host, Mr. Broadway, would meet him at the station. Even the General was not uninterested in these discussions, while Ponsonby entered into the subject with the greatest zeal, and feigned to consider it of the last importance. The

excitement being so general, Elsie was not alarmed when, a day or two afterwards, as she was coming in from the garden with Ponsonby, Miss Maynard darted past her in a breathless condition, and on reaching the drawing-room, looked wildly around, as if she did not exactly know what she was doing.

‘My dear Mr. Ponsonby,’ she said, in answer to that young man’s fervently expressed hope that no evil had befallen the Canon, ‘I trust not; but so many things happen at once, it is quite bewildering. To think of Canon Gosset and Lady Eleanor Fitzgerald arriving at Chippingham on the same day—perhaps in the very same train! and then to be going to St. Leonards on Wednesday—it almost takes one’s breath away!’

‘Canon Gosset and Lady Eleanor Fitzgerald going to St. Leonards on Wednesday!’ said Ponsonby. ‘My dear Miss Maynard, how shocking!’

Miss Maynard clasped her hands over her eyes. ‘What can I have said?’ she exclaimed. ‘It is we who go to St. Leonards on Wednesday, but Lady Eleanor Fitzgerald intends coming here—of that there can be no doubt whatever.’

‘Has she written to say so?’ inquired Elsie, looking rather frightened.

‘Yes, dear child, she has written to your aunt, and proposes to come from Saturday till Monday. Hark! do I not hear your aunt’s voice?’

‘She is calling me,’ said Elsie, and disappeared accordingly.

Mrs. Lindsay was not particularly pleased to find that her intended announcement had been forestalled, and that her niece was already aware of Lady Eleanor’s proposed visit. However, she still improved the occasion to the best of her power.

‘She comes, my love, be sure, with a purpose—and that purpose to judge of *your* suitability as a wife for her first-born son!’

Elsie gasped, as well she might, at this alarming intimation. ‘Did she *say*,’ she asked faintly, ‘anything about me?’

‘She did not absolutely mention your name in words, my love,’ replied her aunt more soothingly. ‘Here is the substance of her note.’

The note, of which Mrs. Lindsay read every word, was as follows :—

‘DEAR CAROLINE—Would it inconvenience you to receive me at the Elms from Saturday till Monday? I am in town for a couple of days’ shopping, and would go to you on my way home. Thanks for your last letter, which, if you can have me, we will discuss when we meet.—Your aff. ELEANOR FITZGERALD.

‘P.S.—I fancy there is a train which arrives at Chipping-ham about four o’clock.’

‘I need not tell you, my dear Elsie,’ said Aunt Caroline, folding up the note, ‘that you must be very careful in your behaviour. Remember that in Lady Eleanor you see one who is, we trust, one day to be united to you by the ties of a very near and dear relationship. You will see in her much that may sadden, much that we could wish otherwise, but, my precious child, beware of judging. If she repels your affection, and treats you with slights and coldness, you must still endeavour to be cheerful and submissive.’

‘Will she do that?’ asked Else. ‘David said she was a person nobody need be afraid of.’

‘Dear, good David!’ said Mrs. Lindsay, shaking her head with a sad smile, ‘he ever sees the silver lining in the cloud.’

With such-like exhortations did Mrs. Lindsay seek to arm her niece’s mind for the approaching trial, and gave her so many injunctions to mind what she was about, and not to offend Lady Eleanor by this, that, or the other, that by the time the visitor arrived she had nearly reduced the unhappy girl to a state of imbecility, brought on by terror.

Great was the commotion which now prevailed in the house, and neither Miss Maynard, the Dales, nor Elsie, dared venture into the drawing-room, while Mrs. Lindsay was holding long conferences there with Ponsonby; the

length of whose countenance, and the glare which Mrs. Lindsay instantly turned upon any one entering the room, being sufficient to strike terror into the boldest spirit.

And now arose an all-important question. What carriage should be sent to meet Lady Eleanor at the station? The brougham or the landau? Should it be open or closed? The season was October, the weather unusually warm; yet, on the other hand, it was apt to get chilly towards evening.

'You had better order a fly for the servants and the luggage,' cried the General, bursting into the room. 'Send down about it at once, and you can send down after lunchcon to see that it is not forgotten. I will speak to How'll——'

'My precious Henry,' said Mrs. Lindsay, 'I do not think Eleanor will bring any attendants except her maid; and her boxes, if bulky, can be fetched later.'

'Eh, what?' said the General. 'You can't tell—better be on the safe side. And what carriage are you going to send?'

'That is the question which is occupying us,' replied his wife, 'but we have no means of knowing whether Eleanor prefers an open carriage or a closed one.'

'I remember David once said that driving in a closed carriage made his mother sick,' said Elsie, who had not liked to mention this fact sooner, as it happened to be Mrs. Lindsay's carriage of which Lady Eleanor had complained to her son. At this statement a murmur went round the room. 'Sick,' they whispered in awestruck tones—'sick, Elsie says—her son says—it makes her sick.'

'The open carriage, then!' said the General, with his hand on the bell. 'How'll——'

'But,' said Mrs. Lindsay, 'if it should rain.'

The General took his hand off the bell, and everybody looked out of the window.

'It looks doubtful, to be sure,' said the General; 'which way is the wind?'

'It is an east wind,' said Elsie, who had been out.

Mrs. Lindsay looked up sharply; she had not wished

the open carriage to be sent at Elsie's bidding. 'Think before you speak, dear,' she said gravely. 'Spring is the season for east winds.'

At this juncture, Miss Maynard, fired with ambition to distinguish herself, jumped up and left the room hastily. In a minute she returned breathless, but triumphant.

'It will not rain, dear,' she said, sinking into a chair near Mrs. Lindsay. 'I have asked Howell, he says it will not.'

Mrs. Lindsay did not look pleased, but rang the bell. 'Send Howell to me at once.'

She now demanded of her prime minister his opinion of the weather, while the company waited eagerly for the oracle to speak. Howell stepped to the barometer which hung in the passage, not far from the drawing-room door, tapped it, looked out of the window, and came back to his mistress.

'There *may* be rain before long m', but I should say it will 'old up this afternoon.'

'It is extremely chilly, however,' said Mrs. Lindsay. 'To me'—she shivered and drew her shawl closer round her—'there is quite a peculiar chill in the atmosphere.'

'Wind is in the heast, m', observed Howell.

'In the east at this season!' exclaimed Mrs. Lindsay. 'And your master just gone out!'

Everybody shuddered.

'Did you tell him of the direction of the wind?' inquired Mrs. Lindsay sternly.

'Ho no,' replied Howell with perfect composure. 'Master will take no 'arm, m'. Heast wind is 'calthy at the fall of the leaf—hall the medical gentlemen 'll tell you that, m'.'

Mrs. Lindsay waved her hand with dignity. 'The *closed* carriage, if you please, to meet the down train at 4.20.' And so the discussion terminated.

At half-past four in the afternoon all were assembled in the drawing-room, and every face was full of expectation. Emma and Sophy stationed themselves at the passage window, to catch the first glimpse of the carriage.

'There it is!' they cried with one breath; 'just turning into the drive'—and Mrs. Lindsay hastened into the hall.

'Oh, Elsie! do come and look!' cried Sophy, running back. 'Howell has opened the door; she is just stepping out!'

'She has got a hat on, I do believe!' cried Emma from her post of observation, and Sophy flew back to verify this astounding fact with her own eyes.

'This,' said Ponsonby, 'is indeed an exciting moment.'

'I can't see her now,' said Sophy, disappointed. 'She has gone in, but here comes the maid—she has a maid—no one else—now they are taking down the box—only one box, that is very little! and a bundle of——'

'Hush, Sophy!' said Emma, 'she will hear you'—for Sophy had raised her voice in announcing these discoveries for the benefit of those in the drawing-room.

Lady Eleanor was by this time in the hall, and the two girls had barely time to get back to the drawing-room before she entered, Mrs. Lindsay affectionately clinging to her arm, and the General, full of hospitality, bringing up the rear.

In the midst of her alarm at the first sight of David's mother, Elsie noticed that Lady Eleanor was much younger and handsomer than she had expected; she looked almost too young to be the mother of a man of David's age, whereas Elsie had been accustomed to regard her as a sort of contemporary of Aunt Caroline. Just at that moment the newcomer appeared to be rather tired and cross. She turned her dark eyes languidly on the three young ladies who were presented to her, without seeming to notice Elsie more than the others, and only brightened up a little when she shook hands with Ponsonby, whom she had formerly been acquainted with.

When she was at length shown to her room she did not reappear till dinner time; and Mrs. Lindsay, who had accompanied her in hopes of a private conference, returned somewhat crestfallen to announce that Lady Eleanor Fitzgerald found herself so fatigued that she had been persuaded to rest on her bedroom sofa for an hour and a half.

Mrs. Lindsay was thus obliged to forego all discussion of Elsie's prospects that day, which disappointed her the more as the next day was Sunday, and Lady Eleanor was going away on Monday morning. The only allusion to her son's engagement was made by the General at dinner time, and this Mrs. Lindsay did not hear, as she was talking to Ponsonby, but Elsie caught the words: 'Well, what do you think of these goings on?'

Lady Eleanor's answer was inaudible, but the General proceeded gaily:

'Davie loses no time, eh? He wants to be settled early in life. As to little Elsie here, why, it seems no time ago since her poor mother was running about in pinafores. They grow up before you can look round, as one may say.'

Elsie heard Lady Eleanor's answer this time.

'Yes indeed, General, a couple of mere children. They will think differently in a year or two.'

'Eh? I don't know that. You don't approve, eh?'

Lady Eleanor glanced round the table to make sure that no one heard. 'Hush, General,' she said, touching his arm softly, 'a very foolish business. How well I remember this room,' she went on in her usual tone, 'nothing in it changed. Those same old engravings, and the very same text over the mantelpiece. Do you know how many years it is since I came here first?'

'You've become a sensible woman since then, Nelly,' said the General with something like a sigh.

She turned towards him quickly.

'Ah! that name takes me back to old times.' There was a softened look on her proud face for a moment, which made Elsie's heart warm to her with a sudden thrill of sympathy.

Mrs. Lindsay, who had heard nothing, now gave the signal for the ladies to retire, and they all filed off into the drawing-room, where they took seats, varying in comfort according to their rank and station. The evening passed somewhat heavily. When the gentlemen came in the three young ladies were sent to the piano to play their pieces, in

which, from sheer nervousness, they all broke down, one after another. Sophy being the last and worst, was so sharply reproved by Aunt Caroline that she was forced to retire from the room in tears. Ponsonby alone was heard to murmur that the music was indeed charming, and when the performance came to a disastrous conclusion, he good-naturedly tried to divert Mrs. Lindsay's attention from the culprit.

Mrs. Lindsay had resolved to devote the following day, which was Sunday, entirely to Canon Gosset, and to put away from her all mundane things ; but even the best of human resolutions are apt to yield to the force of circumstances.

Her conference with Lady Eleanor had not yet been held, and she knew that her visitor had come expressly to talk over her son's future, and took no more interest in Canon Gosset and his missions than if that Gospel teacher had been actually at Ping-yang or Shoo-kow himself. The solemn observances of the house were disregarded by Lady Eleanor. Not only did she not appear at prayers, but she absolutely declined to go to church in the morning.

This annoyed Mrs. Lindsay considerably ; however, she thought it right to go to Gravehurst as usual, taking all her flock with her. The female members of the household were inwardly struck with horror at the strange behaviour of the visitor, but, as Mrs. Lindsay had publicly given out beforehand that they were on no account to judge Lady Eleanor Fitzgerald, no one would have dared to express an opinion, however impious they felt her conduct to be.

But when, in the afternoon, she refused even to go to Chippingham Church to hear Canon Gosset, Mrs. Lindsay herself was really distressed, and did not know what to do with her.

'My darling child,' she said, drawing Elsie aside, 'I am sorry to disappoint you, but I feel that it will be best for you to remain with Lady Eleanor this afternoon. We must remember what is due to others, and deeply as I lament poor Eleanor's worldliness, I feel that it would be scarcely courteous to leave our guest alone a second time.'

Elsie readily complied with her aunt's wish, although her heart failed her at the prospect of spending a long afternoon *tête-à-tête* with the alarming visitor. She had had an uncomfortable consciousness of being watched, although Lady Eleanor had never spoken to her, and she had never even once caught her eye.

'You poor dear thing, how I do pity you !' said Sophy, bestowing a parting hug upon Elsie before hurrying off to prepare for church. 'Be sure to remember all she says, and tell us when we come back. I shall be dying to hear.'

'Be sure you remember what the canon says,' returned Elsie ; 'that is more to the purpose,' and descended to fulfil her afternoon's duty.

She found Lady Eleanor examining the books which were strewn about on the table, in the hope of finding something to read. Apparently her search was fruitless. No novels were ever allowed in the Elms drawing-room ; newspapers were cleared away on Saturday night, and Sunday magazines put in their place ; and the books on the table, which were entitled, *Little Susie's Mission*, *Benjie's Bread and Butter*, *Chirps with the Chickabiddies* ; or (for those who preferred more solid reading) *Haunts and Hiding-places of the Reformers*, *Daylight in Dark Places*, or, *Work among our Black and Brown Sisters*, *Half Hours with the Sick and Sorrowing*, and other volumes of a like character, were rejected by her one after another.

'Have you come to keep me company ?' she asked graciously, at length taking up a book at random, and seating herself.

'If I may,' said Elsie. Lady Eleanor bent her head in acquiescence, and they both read on for some time diligently without raising their eyes. Had any one asked Elsie what was the title of her book, or what it was about, she would have been utterly unable to give an answer, though she kept her eyes perseveringly glued to its pages. By and by Lady Eleanor made a slight movement to arrest her attention, and inquired very abruptly : 'Does David write to you ?'

'Yes,' replied Elsie. 'Sometimes.'

'He doesn't write to me,' said Lady Eleanor, and began to read again. Half an hour passed in this way, when, to Elsie's great relief, Lady Eleanor shut her book decidedly and rose. 'I am going out for a walk,' she said.

'May I come with you?' asked Elsie.

'Certainly,' was the answer, and the visitor began to look around her at the walls and furniture. Presently a sudden idea seemed to strike her, and she asked: 'Do you think Mrs. Lindsay expected me to go to church with her?'

'I think,' said Elsie, rather taken aback, 'she thought you would have liked to go.'

'I should be extremely sorry to annoy any one about such a trifle as going to church, but the fact is, I have a wretched headache—I have had it all day. I suppose *you* never stay away from church?'

'I don't,' said Elsie, 'because I never have a headache, but if I did, I had—I mean, if I had I would.' She stopped confused, angry with herself for her stupidity, and fancying that the expression of face with which Lady Eleanor surveyed her was one of profound contempt. But it was not so, it was merely critical; she was considering whether the girl looked prettier with colour or without.

She next fired at her another of her abrupt questions. 'Would you rather have been at church this afternoon?'

'I would much rather go for a walk,' replied Elsie truthfully.

'Well then, let us go,' said Lady Eleanor, 'and be well out of the way before they come in.'

In a few minutes they sallied forth, accompanied by the three dogs, who were equally surprised and delighted at being taken out walking on a Sunday.

Elsie suggested a walk by the river side, but her companion seemed to have little taste for the beauties of nature. 'Let us walk on the high-road,' she said; 'that will be every bit as good—will it not? and far less trouble.' She asked Elsie a few questions about her life at Chippingham, what she did, and how she liked it; the

girl's answers were necessarily a little guarded, and sounded stiff and prim to herself; she was conscious of appearing to great disadvantage in the eyes of David's mother.

'She must think me a perfect idiot,' said she mentally. But it was utterly impossible to judge from Lady Eleanor's manner what she thought of her. She was thoughtful, as if pondering some question in her mind; and nothing that Elsie said seemed to interest her at all. When they had gone about a mile and a half she stopped. 'This is a very good level road,' she said; 'let us turn now.' On their way home she spoke no word, good or bad; except once, when Elsie turned to rebuke the dogs for snuffing at the heels of a passer-by, she said to her, 'How old are you?' to which Elsie answered, 'I shall be eighteen to-morrow.'

CHAPTER XX.

Sil. Is she not passing fair ?

Jul. She has been fairer, madam, than she is.

Sil. Alas, poor lady ! desolate and left !—
I weep myself, to think upon thy words.'

MRS. LINDSAY had, after all, arranged the disposal of this day very much to her own satisfaction. Her plan that Elsie should stay at home and make acquaintance with her future mother-in-law seemed to her an admirable one ; her own conference with the latter should take place after tea, and with this view she directed Emma and Sophy not to loiter in the drawing-room, but to retire to their room, and there meditate on the truths they had just heard so powerfully expressed by Canon Gosset. Ponsonby, she knew, would go out of doors and smoke ; and she had found a means of disposing of Miss Maynard and Elsie. At tea-time Mrs. Lindsay was enthusiastic over the sermon, and lamented her failing memory, which was unable to retain more than a small portion of so moving a discourse.

'But you, dear Cecilia, have taken notes, I know. Elsie dear, if you will go to Miss Maynard's room after tea, she has kindly consented to read them to you.'

Accordingly, as soon as tea was over, every one except Mrs. Lindsay and Lady Eleanor disappeared as if by magic. Elsie went to Miss Maynard's room as directed, but when that lady began to search in her pocket for her notes the girl stopped her.

'Never mind Canon Gosset, dear Miss Maynard,' she said ; 'Mr. Ponsonby has told me all about him. I

want to talk to you. Tell me all you know about Lady Eleanor.'

'This has been a trying day for you, dear,' said Miss Maynard anxiously. 'Do you think that you will be able to love her?'

'Yes,' said Elsie decidedly, after a minute's reflection. 'I could if she would let me, but it is impossible that she can like me.'

'And why so, dear?' said her friend, kissing her. 'It would be difficult indeed to help loving you.'

'It will not be at all difficult to Lady Eleanor,' returned Elsie. 'But never mind that. I think her very interesting; tell me all you know about her. When did you see her first? and do you think Aunt Caroline really likes her or not?'

'Your dear aunt,' replied Miss Maynard, nothing loath to have a little gossip with her favourite, 'was formerly much attached to her, but—— The first time I saw Lady Eleanor was—it must be nearly twenty-five years ago, when she came here as a bride—a lovely bride, of scarce seventeen summers. Her first husband was, you know, General Lindsay's nephew; he was a young man of singular personal attractions.'

'Is David like his father?' inquired Elsie.

Miss Maynard paused before replying. 'You will pardon me, my love, when I say that young Mr. Lindsay is scarcely so richly endowed by nature, as regards mere outward form. Nevertheless there is a strong family resemblance. Your aunt,' she proceeded, 'conceived the most enthusiastic affection for the young bride, whom she loved like a sister. Her generous heart was full of sympathy for the young pair, for theirs had been purely a love match; in fact'—she hesitated and lowered her voice—'there had been a—an elope-ment. My dear, you ought not to lead me into making these disclosures.'

'I knew it was a runaway marriage,' said Elsie. 'Aunt Grizel has often told me the story. But I wonder then that Aunt Caroline approved of it.'

'Your dear aunt,' said her friend, 'although by no

means in her first youth, had been but lately married herself, and her heart expanded and, as it were, overflowed with affection; and this young creature, cast off as she was by her parents, was doubtless glad to find a resting-place here.'

'Would her parents not forgive her?'

'Their resentment did not last long. Lady Eleanor was the youngest and favourite daughter, petted, indulged, and somewhat wilful. She was destined by her parents to some higher position, to which her beauty and rank might well have entitled her; her husband's person, character, and lineage being, however, irreproachable, they ultimately recovered from their disappointment, and were willing to embrace him as a son.'

'But did Lady Eleanor and her husband remain poor?'

'Yes, dear; they never attained affluence during Colonel Lindsay's lifetime. He found himself frequently in difficulties, and the expectations which he entertained of succeeding to both money and rank were destined never, in his person, to be realised.'

'And how is it,' asked Elsie, 'that she and Aunt Caroline have left off loving each other like sisters?'

'I can scarcely tell you what were the first slight causes which led to estrangement. Lady Eleanor was, as I have said, wilful and somewhat haughty, and your aunt thought her foolishly extravagant. Her husband could refuse her nothing; and your aunt, in short, regretted the way in which they managed their affairs. Then when Lady Eleanor became the mother of a beautiful boy, and your dear aunt, surrounded by every comfort which money could procure, remained childless, naturally it was a great vexation to dear Caroline. I had not then made my home permanently under your kind uncle's roof, so that I did not see Lady Eleanor again until two years after her husband's death, when she came here with her younger son, then a child of five years. Up to that time she had resided in Scotland; but she came south to place her elder boy at school, and remained in England in order to be near

him. She stayed here for about two months ; and it was, my love, an exceedingly unfortunate visit.' Miss Maynard paused and sighed. 'In many ways Lady Eleanor was much to be pitied, her husband and her mother both dead, and she struggling with pecuniary difficulties. Yet—your aunt justly thought that she did not bear her troubles in a right spirit. It was painful to see how, when spoken to of economy and of patience, she gave way to fits of sullenness, often to tears ; which, your aunt could not but feel, owed their origin to temper rather than to grief. Then, her method of bringing up her child was not such as your aunt could at all approve. He was a sadly mischievous little boy, and, though outwardly handsome, his infant features but too plainly denoted evil passions.'

'And he only five!' exclaimed Elsie. 'Poor little boy!'

'He was very precocious,' said Miss Maynard, 'and expressed himself with wonderful fluency for his age. There were frequent disturbances, and his mother always took his part. Well do I remember once, when your aunt reproved him severely for calling his attendant names,—shocking names, my dear! I could not repeat them,—he told her to mind her own affairs! Young as he was, your dear aunt's keen eye could detect in him the seeds of every vice.'

'They have not come up, then,' said Elsie rather indignantly. 'I am sure Lionel is a nice boy, David seems so fond of him. I don't believe there is any vice about him.'

'I have since heard him described,' said Miss Maynard, 'as a youth of pleasing exterior, and I am willing to hope the best of every one. But I fear that never, under any conditions, can he be acceptable to your Aunt Caroline.'

Elsie remained silent for some minutes, pondering on what she had heard. 'I feel very sorry for Lady Eleanor,' she said at last. 'I think it must have been very hard for her, with all her troubles, to come here and be bullied by Aunt Caroline when she wasn't used to being found fault with. And if she does not want me to marry David, I think it is quite natural. She thinks it will be her own story over again—that I should be extravagant, and David

not able to refuse me anything, and that I should waste all his money.'

'But, my love, you are a very different person from Lady Eleanor, and would not be extravagant, I feel sure.'

'Yes, but she can't know that, nor that there would be no need for David to refuse me things, because I should not ask for them. But, indeed, I am afraid I am too poor for him; why was I not told all these things before? How can people know anything if they are not *told*?' and she looked reproachfully at Miss Maynard.

'My dear child,' said the bewildered lady, 'what could you have done if you had known?'

'I might have refused David for his own good, like people in books. But don't look so distressed, dear Miss Maynard, it is too late to do it now, and I don't know that I am very sorry. But what did Lady Eleanor do next? Was there a quarrel?'

'No, there was no open breach. Lady Eleanor left the Elms to reside with her father, the Earl of Lynmouth, which she continued to do until his death. But your uncle and aunt, disapproving as they did her method of bringing up her children, did not think it right to invite her here again. Your uncle, perhaps, would have liked—but no, on such subjects they always feel together. They were most anxious to adopt the eldest son as their own, but his mother refused this offer—I may say, she rejected it angrily.'

'Then she never came here again until now?'

'She paid a formal visit of a few days with her husband, upon her second marriage. Mr. Fitzgerald had been a very persistent suitor, but Lady Eleanor did not accept him until after her father's death. He made a favourable impression upon your aunt, although she could not but suspect that worldly motives on Lady Eleanor's part had prompted the step'—— Miss Maynard stopped and started guiltily, as a knock was heard at the door. It opened a little way, and Sophy's round face was thrust in.

'May I come in, Cousin Cecilia? I knew I should find Elsie here. Oh, Elsie, only think——!'

'Dear me, Sophy,' said Elsie, annoyed at the interruption, 'you surely cannot have done meditating already?'

'Long ago!' replied the damsel cheerfully. 'I have been talking to Bridget.' (Bridget was the upper house-maid.) 'Her niece is going to be married to Tysoe, the baker, he is a Particular Baptist, I wonder if auntie will let her go to the wedding! What is a Particular Baptist? Do you know, Cousin Cecilia? Elsie, do you? Bridget does not.'

'What's the use of your being a clergyman's daughter if you know nothing about sects?' returned her better instructed friend contemptuously. 'A Particular Baptist is just a kind of Baptist, which is very rare. There used to be one at St. Ethernans, who made besoms. Let us leave Miss Maynard to take her rest before supper.' And disregarding Sophy's question as to what 'bizzums' might be, Elsie left the room hastily.

CHAPTER XXI.

'O why should fate sic pleasure have
Life's dearest bands entwining?
Or why sae sweet a flower as love
Depend on Fortune's shining!'

MEANWHILE, in the drawing-room, the two ladies were holding a no less interesting discussion. Lady Eleanor had moved into a large arm-chair, and was thoughtfully playing with a fire-screen. Mrs. Lindsay, having settled herself for conversation, and waited in vain for her friend to begin, at length cleared her throat and said—

'It was not, Eleanor, without design that I left Elspeth with you this afternoon. It is best that we should understand one another plainly. What opinion, dear, have you formed regarding her?'

'She is very pretty,' answered Lady Eleanor slowly. '*Very* pretty—and will be prettier yet. You see I don't want to disparage her. But I wonder, Caroline, that a woman of your age and experience can encourage anything so nonsensical as this engagement.'

'Encourage it!' cried Mrs. Lindsay, becoming excited. 'You know how I have acted from the first. If you did not heed the written warning which I instantly despatched to you——'

'Now don't get angry,' said Lady Eleanor impatiently. 'You said yourself we were to speak plainly. I only mean, any one might have foreseen that David would fancy himself in love with her. A boy of two-and-twenty and a pretty girl of seventeen, in a house together for three weeks! what else could you expect?'

‘I certainly did NOT expect,’ said Mrs. Lindsay with her handkerchief to her eyes, ‘to be accused of complicity——’

‘If you are going to be offended, Caroline,’ said Lady Eleanor, taking up a book, ‘we had better drop the subject. I should be sorry to hurt your feelings.’ She really wished to avoid a scene, and was, in her secret heart, rather afraid of provoking Mrs. Lindsay. Although she had been spoilt all her life, it was not from real strength of will that Lady Eleanor ruled others; but by a peculiar sort of charm, impossible to describe, which was felt by most men and some women. Elsie fell under its influence at once, and was ready to become her devoted slave; but Mrs. Lindsay, it is needless to say, was as free from any weakness of the sort as ever Queen Elizabeth had been, and in her former encounters with Lady Eleanor had invariably come off victorious. But she was now perfectly aware of the difference in their positions, and not knowing her advantage, she pocketed her handkerchief and replied—‘My feelings, I trust, are under control; at whatever cost of pain to myself, I will finish this conversation. You are of course aware, Eleanor, that the happiness of two young lives rests upon your decision.’

‘This is the first time,’ said Lady Eleanor rather resentfully, ‘that anybody has thought proper to consult me on the matter. David has rushed into this engagement without asking my advice, and now other people must take the responsibility. I don’t know what you would have me decide.’

‘Am I to understand that you would give your consent to the marriage of these young people, provided——’

‘How can I consent to let them marry on nothing?’ cried Lady Eleanor impatiently. ‘You must see for yourself, Caroline, that the thing is impossible.’

‘That is not the *immediate* question. We shall come to that point presently. I have in my possession a letter from Captain Ross, with whom I have necessarily been in communication.’ She drew out the document in question, and tapped the table with it, perhaps imagining that Lady Eleanor would instantly beg to have it read to

her ; but Mrs. Lindsay's air of superiority in the matter fretted her rival beyond endurance.

'Oh, I know all that Captain Ross has to say. David has been staying there—he came back full of it. Captain Ross consents if I do, and if Frederick does, and all that—and if he can produce enough to live upon, which he can't. I cannot prevent their being engaged, if they wish ; they will not be able to marry for years. An engagement is a very different thing from a marriage.'

'Surely!' said Mrs. Lindsay with emphasis. 'And that speech (in whatever spirit it was made) leads to *my* solution of the difficulty. My dear generous husband, who, in spite of all that has come and gone, has always looked upon David as his heir, is willing to allow him *now* the sum of £500 a year, which, with his own £300, will go far to satisfy the requirements of Elspeth's father, and be amply sufficient for the needs of a prudent and self-denying young couple. This, dear Eleanor, is the proposal I wished to make to you, and to you alone ; for without your consent as a parent I should feel it wrong to proceed in the matter.' Mrs. Lindsay here wiped her eyes, for she felt somewhat overcome by her own eloquence and the magnanimity of her offer, and, folding her arms, waited for her friend's reply.

'You are very kind, Caroline,' said Lady Eleanor ; 'really, extremely kind—but I could not hear of it. You really are too romantic, my dear. Let David go back to India, and you will find they will both change their minds in a few months.'

Mrs. Lindsay's eyes flashed with indignation. 'You little know the constancy and the truth of these two beautiful young natures ; but I had not expected such a speech from *you*, Eleanor ! Strange how the world has power to alter and corrupt our hearts ! Have you, then, quite forgotten your own young married life ?'

'No,' said Lady Eleanor, looking at her composedly. 'I remember it quite well—it was most uncomfortable. You may be shocked at me, Caroline—I daresay you are—but I don't believe in constancy and broken hearts, and

that sort of thing. I know *now* perfectly well, that if they had prevented me from marrying poor Archie—I should have been very sorry of course, but it would not have broken my heart—not a bit.’

‘And *His*?’ demanded Mrs. Lindsay, in a tone between grief and indignation. ‘What of *HIM*?’

Lady Eleanor had been about to pursue her argument, but she stopped short suddenly at these words, and remained silent. She had been occupied with her own heart at the moment, and had entirely forgotten that of her husband; but as she recalled his unchanging devotion to her, her face grew grave, and she did not care to continue the subject.

‘Now if I were you,’ she began again presently, ‘I would take that pretty niece of yours about a little, and let her see some people. What can you expect if you never let her go into any society? I daresay David is the only man she ever saw.’

‘This is a totally useless discussion,’ said Mrs. Lindsay, who was now bitterly disappointed, for she had already begun to think with joy of preparing Elsie’s outfit, and now it did not seem likely to be needed. ‘I know my duties, Eleanor, and you know my principles. My strength’—she laid her hand upon her heart—‘is not equal to a conversation of this kind. It gives me too much pain. All I ask from you to-night is, not to reject my proposal finally, I shall look for your decision to-morrow ere you leave us. Now, dear, if you will excuse me.’ She rose, and holding on by the table for support, moved with tottering steps towards the door.

‘Don’t let me be in your way,’ said Lady Eleanor. ‘I am going to my room.’

While the party were at breakfast next morning a man’s voice and step were suddenly heard in the hall, and, much to every one’s surprise, David walked in. A great bustle of course ensued, but David took it all with perfect composure, and seemed to think it quite impossible that any one could be in the least embarrassed or disturbed by his entrance. Hearing his mother was at Chippingham, he

said he thought he would just take a run over there, and relieve her mind about Lionel, who was getting on famously.

The morning was spent in a series of private interviews in the boudoir, held by Mrs. Lindsay with each separate member of the company, Elsie alone excepted. In some suspense she waited her turn, but it was not until the morning was nearly past that she was formally summoned to a family council in the study. There sat the General in his big arm-chair, who called her to him kindly, and patted her on the back. His wife sat on his other side, with one hand in his, and the other holding her pocket-handkerchief ready for use. Lady Eleanor sat opposite, trying to appear indifferent, and not succeeding very well, while David stood with his back against the mantelpiece, looking vexed and angry.

'Elsie,' said the General, in obedience to a nudge from his wife, 'Elsie—ahem!'

'Yes, Uncle Henry,' said Elsie.

'Elsie, your aunt thinks—well, she thinks—that—well, that in two years you will be older.'

'What are you saying, dearest?' said Mrs. Lindsay energetically; 'that is not the question, and it is by no means my wish that——' here she stopped and whispered in her husband's ear.

'Oh—ah!' said the General helplessly, not having heard a word of the whisper. 'Well, at anyrate, somebody said so—you did, Nelly!'

'No, I didn't,' said Lady Eleanor.

There was a short silence, during which David, making an impatient movement with his foot, somehow managed to knock down the fire-irons with a tremendous clatter, causing every one to start violently, and Mrs. Lindsay to shriek aloud. After quiet was restored, the General's nerves being too much shaken to continue his speech, his wife took up her parable and said—

'Your dear uncle was about to tell you, Elsie, that Lady Eleanor, without absolutely forbidding your engagement, has determined——'

'Why do you insist upon dragging *me* in?' said Lady Eleanor. 'It has been thought best by every one.'

'Not by me,' put in David.

'Your friends then,' said Mrs. Lindsay with seraphic patience, after a little pause, 'have decided upon a two years' probation for you and David. If, at the end of that time, your sentiments remain unchanged, no obstacle'—she stopped and looked at Lady Eleanor—'no obstacle, will be placed in the way of your union.'

Elsie, too, glanced at Lady Eleanor, who gazed at the opposite wall and said nothing.

Elsie supposed she was expected to speak, so she said, 'I am quite satisfied then, Aunt Caroline, I think it is a very good plan. We may write to each other, may not we?' and again she looked at Lady Eleanor. But David came forward and took both her hands.

'Of course,' he said, 'and see as much of each other as we can—that is expressly stipulated. There is no help for it, Elsie; but this day two years, if I live, I will come back and claim you.'

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

Was macht mein lieber Held,
Mein junges Königsblut?
Er fühlet in alle Welt,
Und hat gar stolzen Muth.
Hat er noch mein vergessen,
Und denkt er rimner mein?
Er hat dein noch vergessen,
Beim trinken und beim essen,
Bei Regen und Sonnenschein !'

LADY ELEANOR'S three nieces sat in the garden parlour at Alkerton one December afternoon. This was a small but pleasant room on the ground-floor, oak-panelled like the dining-room, and made bright with jars of chrysanthemums, Christmas roses, and other winter-blooming flowers. The two Miss Mortimers were paying their aunt a visit of some weeks' duration ; their sister, Lady Seathwaite, with her little girl, had lately joined them, with the intention of remaining till after Christmas, as the child had been weak and ailing, and the mother also was glad of a change from the cold and dreariness of Seathwaite Hall. Her husband did not accompany her ; he disliked his wife's relations, who, on their part, cordially returned the feeling ; and though Lady Seathwaite had never before ventured to leave him at home alone for so long a time, she had grown bolder for her child's sake, and in the society of her own family her natural light-heartedness prevailed, and she allowed herself, at times, to forget her miseries.

It yet wanted about a fortnight to Christmas Day ; the weather, in that cold midland district, was mild for the

season, a sharp frosty morning being generally succeeded by a raw damp afternoon, and no snow had as yet fallen. The short winter day was over, a servant brought in the lamps, and the sisters left the tea-table and gathered round the fire.

'Aunt Eleanor is late,' observed Constance Mortimer. 'What can be keeping her? I hope she will come in in time to receive Miss Ross; what a bore it will be if she doesn't.'

'And so awkward for us!' said Blanche, the youngest.

'Well, it may be a bore, as Constance says, but I see nothing awkward about it, Blanche,' said Lady Seathwaite. 'Constance, it strikes me those people will want fresh tea.'

Constance looked as if she would like to contradict her sister, but finding it undeniable that there was no tea left in the pot, she rang the bell sharply. She was a slender, dark-eyed girl, with rather a narrow face and aquiline features. She was not ill-tempered, but there was something discontented and querulous about the droop of her nose and lips, and in the tone of her voice. Her movements were graceful, and she was admired by many people, but more because it was the fashion to call the Miss Mortimers handsome, than from any special good looks which Constance herself possessed. Her younger sister Blanche, a tall, well-grown, fresh-coloured girl of nineteen, had, in spite of irregular features, more decided claims to beauty, with her dark gypsy eyes, white teeth, and rich complexion; but it was Rosamond who had won for the sisterhood, in her unmarried days, the name of the handsome Miss Mortimers. Not so tall as either of her sisters, but beautifully formed, she looked less than her real height; she had a charming piquant little face, gray eyes with long dark lashes, rich wavy brown hair, and a complexion like a damask rose. She would have been a most attractive creature to look upon had it not been for an air of extreme haughtiness and disdain which, ever since her ill-fated marriage, she had thought fit to assume. In her girlish days she had been gay, lively, and amusing, but the unhappy life she had led, and the constant brooding over

her wrongs, had changed her greatly. Her natural courage and bright disposition prevented her from sinking into a dull spiritless state, but she had long fits of silence and depression; her smiles now came unwillingly, as if she was angry with herself for even feeling amused; and her acquaintances were wont to complain that little Lady Seathwaite gave herself such airs that it was impossible even to feel much compassion for her. It was only when alone with her child that her real nature showed itself; with her sisters too, she unbent a little, and condescended occasionally to make jokes at their expense.

'My dear Rose,' said Blanche, rather pompously resuming her argument after satisfying herself that a wheelbarrow she had heard outside was not the expected carriage, 'whatever you may say, I think it extremely awkward for us to receive our future cousin without a proper introduction.'

'She never will be our cousin, most likely,' said Constance scornfully. 'Aunt Eleanor does not wish it, she says it is most unsuitable. And do not, Blanche, for goodness' sake, make any of your prim speeches to her. She is no relation to *us*, you know, there is no need to put things in her head; she will most likely be quite conceited enough without that.'

Rose's lip curled. 'If Aunt Eleanor finds it unsuitable,' she said rather bitterly, 'you may depend upon it that poor Miss Ross will never have a chance of attaining to the proud position of being "our relation," which Constance seems to think so desirable. You shall receive her, Blanche, and afterwards Constance can take down her conceit, you know. Wait—we will have a private rehearsal. This chair'—placing one in the doorway—'represents Miss Ross; now this is Blanche receiving her.'

As Rose advanced towards the chair, with an exact imitation of her sister's self-possessed and condescending manner, the door was thrown open, and 'Miss Ross' announced. With a quick movement Rosamond retreated, and dropped into a large arm-chair by the table, with an air of indifference which would have done her considerable

credit as an actress. The chair which represented Miss Ross was left where it was, and poor Elsie, coming in out of the darkness, nearly ran against it, which did not tend to lessen the feeling of nervous shyness which had seized her on this her first visit to David's relatives.

It was now nearly a year since David had left her to return to India, during which time Elsie had lived on her quiet monotonous life at Chippingham, of which she often felt heartily tired, yet hitherto had not been allowed to leave her uncle and aunt, even for a day. The visit to Rossie, which she had promised herself in the summer, and to which she had looked forward with such pleasure, had been postponed to another year in consequence of the events which had taken place there, and the state of her stepmother's health. Early in June Euphemia had become the mother of twin sons, thus amply fulfilling the duties of her station, and earning for herself the approbation of her husband's family and friends, though the Laird himself had been heard to remark ungratefully that one at a time would have been enough in all conscience, and that some women could never do things in moderation. The twins, who received the names of Patrick and Allan, were healthy and thriving children, but the poor mother's life was for some time despaired of, and her recovery was so slow that for many weeks all exertion and excitement were forbidden. It was not until the month of August that, a change of air having been prescribed, the Laird packed off his wife, children, and nurses, under the charge of Aunt Grizel, to Strathpeffer, with instructions not to leave that watering-place until Euphemia had regained her strength. This would have been Elsie's opportunity for paying her father a visit, but the Laird, having got rid of his family, applied himself to the examination of his drains, which he found to be in so unsatisfactory a state that he wrote to his daughter to the effect that she had better put off her intended visit for that year. Elsie's one great pleasure, therefore, consisted in her correspondence with David, which was maintained very regularly, almost every mail bringing her a letter from her lover. In October she

accompanied her uncle and aunt to St. Leonards for their 'annual inhalement of sea breezes,' as Aunt Caroline called it, and soon after their return to the Elms Elsie received an invitation from Lady Eleanor to pay her a visit at Alkerton.

Although Elsie was extremely afraid of David's mother, and looked forward to her stay at Alkerton with far more alarm than pleasure, she never hesitated about accepting the invitation. It was not until she was actually in the train that her courage began to fail, and by the time the wheels of the carriage which had been sent to meet her crunched upon the gravel of the drive she was desperately asking herself, 'Why was I so *insane* as to come here?' Nor did the reception she met with from Lady Eleanor's nieces tend to allay her apprehensions. They were not in the least rude, certainly; yet Constance contrived to convey by her manner the impression that Elsie's coming at all, but especially her arrival by so punctual a train, was a liberty such as no really well-bred person would have been guilty of taking. Blanche followed suit; and Rosamond, after Elsie's first entrance, took no notice of her at all, but sat in her arm-chair apparently absorbed in some crewel-work. The other two watched Elsie as she drank her tea with coldly critical eyes, occasionally asking her some trivial question languidly, and as if it cost them a great deal of trouble to invent so much conversation. At first Elsie tried to answer cheerfully, but finding from their indifferent replies that it was only labour thrown away, she relapsed into monosyllables, and took courage to look about her a little. The room, with its dark walls and tasteful furniture, was positively refreshing to her eyes. If there had been one friendly face in it, how pleasant it would have been! She looked across at Lady Seathwaite, whose beauty attracted her greatly, and wished that she would look up and speak; but Rosamond did not once turn her head. Elsie could just see her face in profile as she sewed, the dark eyebrow raised a little to express complete indifference, but otherwise giving no sign that she was aware of any one's presence. It was a relief to all when the door

opened and Lady Eleanor came in, leading by the hand little Mona Seathwaite, a pretty but delicate-looking child of some four or five years of age. The chair in its awkward position in the doorway at once attracted Lady Eleanor's attention, and she began indignantly—

‘It is the very oddest thing—Oh, how do you do?’—catching sight of Elsie, who had risen—‘the very oddest thing that nobody can move in this house without falling over chairs. Who could have put that there?’

‘It was I, Aunt Eleanor—I beg your pardon,’ said Rosamond, lifting her calm face from her work. ‘We were—rehearsing one of our Christmas charades before Miss Ross arrived. The word was to have been “Welcome.”’

‘A very stupid word for a charade, I think,’ said Lady Eleanor, still ruffled.

‘It happened,’ replied Rosamond slowly, ‘to be appropriate at the moment.’

She drew little Mona towards her and began to unfasten the child's heavy wraps, while Lady Eleanor turned to Elsie with more cordiality of manner.

‘Have they taken good care of you?’ she asked. ‘How late it is! I had no idea Mrs. Freeman's tea-party would have kept me so long, but her servants are the slowest I ever saw in my life. I thought the carriage would never come to the door.’

Elsie had hoped and expected to find Lionel at Alkerton. She had made friends with him at St. Leonards, where, it may be remembered, David had taken him to recover from his fever the year before. Elsie had been much attracted by Lionel's handsome face and boyish confiding ways. Aunt Caroline, however, never could abide him, and still declared him to be a vicious youth. She would not even allow that he was good-looking, but maintained that he had a ‘lowering brow,’ which rendered his appearance disagreeable, she might almost say repulsive, to her peculiarly penetrating eye.

It was not until Elsie came down to dinner, on this her first evening at Alkerton, that she learnt that Lionel was not expected for some days. This was a decided blow to

her, as she had looked forward to his friendship and support, but she was beginning to recover a little from her first shyness. At dinner she sat next to Mr. Fitzgerald, opposite Lady Seathwaite, whom she looked at with increasing admiration. Once or twice Elsie caught the dark gray eyes fixed upon her with a strange look of interest, and almost compassion, but the next moment she thought it was fancy, as Rosamond leaned back carelessly in her chair, or turned to address some half-mocking speech to her next neighbour. Mr. Fitzgerald was exceedingly kind and complimentary to Elsie, and made her a speech, rendered personal by a little bow, in which he spoke of the privilege he enjoyed in being surrounded by such a 'galaxy of beauty.'

When the ladies left the dining-room Rosamond went up at once to the nursery, and did not return for nearly an hour. Constance drew up a footstool to her aunt's side, and engaged her in a very earnest, low-toned conversation about dresses, which was unintelligible to Elsie, but which to Constance was a very serious subject indeed, as she was engaged to be married, and it related to her own trousseau. Blanche was therefore left to entertain the visitor, which she seemed to do willingly enough. She dropped the supercilious manner which at first she had thought proper to assume, and became perfectly gracious, not to say patronising. When Mr. Fitzgerald came in music was proposed, but as Elsie could not play or sing, the girls excused themselves, saying they would wait till Lionel came home, and the visitor was told off to play *bésique* with Mr. Fitzgerald, a duty which some one had to perform every evening.

Elsie found her position much more endurable than she had thought it when she first arrived, and would have gone to rest peacefully enough but for a little conversation her hostess held with her before leaving her for the night.

'I have put you into this room, quite near Blanche,' said Lady Eleanor, 'so you need not be frightened; but I daresay you are a sensible girl and not nervous at night. I hate noises myself.'

She glanced round the room, then took up her candle as if to go away. As Elsie approached to bid her good-night, she said suddenly, 'Have you heard from David lately?'

'I didn't hear last mail,' said Elsie.

'Nor the mail before?'

'No; but then he told me to expect that.'

'Ah!' said Lady Eleanor.

'He is not—ill? You have no reason to be anxious about him?' said Elsie in sudden alarm. 'Have you heard from him, Lady Eleanor?'

'I didn't hear *from* him,' said Lady Eleanor slowly, setting down her candle and turning to the fire. 'No, no, he is not ill—you need not look at me like that. I don't know how to tell you, child.'

'What?' said Elsie under her breath.

'It seems there is a report about him in his regiment, I heard it about three weeks ago from Mrs. Freeman, who is sister-in-law to the Colonel, that a young Lindsay—David never mentioned a Miss Pratt to you, did he?'

Elsie shook her head.

'Well, she is a—not a very nice girl, from all accounts, and there was some entanglement. The Colonel, it seems, was sorry for the young man, knowing the Pratts to be designing people, and he sent him on duty up the country somewhere, to be out of harm's way—which would explain our not having had letters—and I hope it is all right now—but——'

'I do not believe it,' said Elsie, drawing herself up.

Lady Eleanor looked at her.

'There is no need to be rude, my dear,' she said. 'It is a very unpleasant report, of course—and there *may* be no truth in it; still, a girl cannot be too much on her guard.'

'On my guard against what?' said Elsie proudly. 'I do not believe a single word of this story, Lady Eleanor—do you believe it yourself?'

Lady Eleanor avoided meeting Elsie's direct gaze; she hesitated, and looked fixedly at the point of her shoe, which rested on the fender.

'One would think the Colonel's wife ought to know,' she said at length. 'I am not alarmed about it, as David is not apt to get into scrapes, and of course, as you can throw no light upon it, I shall write to him at once, and learn the whole story; but I don't know that it would do for *you* to go on writing as if nothing had happened—that is the reason I warned you.'

'You wish me to break off my engagement,' said Elsie; 'but I have no reason for doing so, unless I believe this report, which I don't. So I am just where I was before.'

'You are exceedingly obstinate,' said Lady Eleanor, provoked. 'I am sure I don't know what sort of a wife you will make. Well, I suppose advice is thrown away upon you; but if I were in your place, I should certainly not put myself into competition with a Miss Pratt. If there is to be any breach or coolness it had better come from the girl's side.' With these words as a parting benediction, Lady Eleanor withdrew, leaving Elsie to reflect upon what she had said.

Elsie was not so brave as her words; and this report of her lover's unfaithfulness was far from leaving her as tranquil as it had found her. She indignantly refused to admit, even to herself, that there was the least ground for believing it, yet Lady Eleanor's communication rendered her utterly miserable and perplexed. When, in the morning, she awoke from the troubled sleep into which she had at length fallen, she wondered at herself for having dared to answer Lady Eleanor as she did. Some instinctive feeling had led her to do so. 'Yet'—thought Elsie, 'perhaps I was very ungrateful, for what motive could she have had, except my good? But if she believed the story herself, which she seemed to do, I wonder she was not more distressed. Perhaps she really was, but was too proud to show it. I wish I could understand her.'

She was destined to be still more perplexed that day by her hostess's behaviour. Lady Eleanor did not seem to be in the least offended with her; on the contrary, she was extremely kind, and took more notice of her than she had ever done before.

After luncheon, when Constance and Blanche proposed a walk, and invited Elsie to accompany them, Lady Eleanor interfered—

‘No,’ she said; ‘Elsie is tired. Do not tease her to walk with you; I am going to take her for a drive.’

Elsie, surprised and grateful, hastened to get ready, and was soon seated beside her hostess in the pony-carriage, which was drawn by an old white horse whose steadiness was proverbial, and who was the only animal Lady Eleanor would ever consent to drive.

As soon as they were alone together, Lady Eleanor asked, ‘Have you thought over what I said last night?’

‘I have thought of nothing else,’ was the answer. ‘It was very kind of you to warn me,’ she added timidly; ‘but indeed, Lady Eleanor, I know David would not do a thing like that.’

Lady Eleanor said nothing.

‘I shall hear—I am almost sure to hear from him to-morrow. If I were at Chippingham I should hear to-day, but the letter will have to be forwarded.’

‘And if you do not hear?’

Elsie hesitated.

‘Do you think I ought not to write?’

‘I shall have to write,’ said Lady Eleanor, ‘and ask him to explain his conduct. If you have any message you had better entrust it to me.’

‘Thank you, Lady Eleanor,’ said Elsie doubtfully. ‘Yes, I will do that—if I have no letter. But I am almost sure to have one.’

Lady Eleanor seemed satisfied, and as they drove along she talked kindly and pleasantly, pointing out the different villages through which they passed. Elsie admired the country very much: the winding river, which in summer could scarcely be seen through the thick grass, was now broad and full, and many of the low-lying meadows were flooded. The fine old trees, though now stripped of their leaves, looked beautiful, and allowed a greater extent of view to be visible through their bare branches; far away the white smoke of a train appeared and vanished, its whistle

being distinctly heard in the still, heavy air. Everything was wet, very wet, heavy drops splashed from the brown thatch of the cottages, and a whitish mist rose from the river banks.

'Yes, it is a pretty country, I suppose,' said Lady Eleanor, in answer to Elsie's remark; 'but I can't bear it myself. The climate is detestable, I have never felt well since I left Devonshire.'

Soon they came to Wroxbury, the market town of the district; and after giving some orders to one or two shopmen, Lady Eleanor turned to her companion—

'We will go to the post-office, though it is a little out of our way, and see if the mail is in.'

'No letter from David, though I ought to have heard to-day,' she said, as the servant came back empty-handed. She looked a little thoughtful, but apparently did not allow herself to dwell upon the subject.

'We will drive home by Copeham,' she said, 'I have a visit to pay there. The husband of the lady I am going to see, Captain Battisley, is an officer lately home from India, with an invalid wife. He considers himself fortunate in getting the adjutancy of the yeomanry here—as he is not very well off. She is a lady-like person.'

Elsie did not feel much interest in this information, and rather wondered why Lady Eleanor should have taken the trouble to bestow it upon her. After mounting a steep hill they reached Copeham, a picturesque village, and stopped outside the gate of a small, rather mean-looking house.

'Captain Battisley used to live in Wroxbury,' explained Lady Eleanor further; 'but he had to leave it, and come and live on the hill, on account of his wife's neuralgia. This place is not nearly so convenient for him.' She looked full at Elsie whilst she said this, and the girl wondered still more.

'Why does she look at me so severely?' thought she. 'Anybody would think I had given this lady neuralgia. I never even heard of her.'

The door was at length opened by a very untidy parlour-

maid, who said Mrs. Battisley was at home, and they were ushered into a hot, stuffy little drawing-room, where the invalid lady lay on the sofa. Elsie was not at all favourably impressed either by the room or its occupant; she thought the lady peevish and disagreeable, and the room not only poor but slovenly and uncared for. Lady Eleanor listened patiently, whilst Mrs. Battisley recounted some of her many grievances, and by and by asked if she might see the children.

‘Certainly, if you care to,’ said Mrs. Battisley, looking surprised, ‘but they are in a shockingly untidy state, I know. Shall I send for baby?’

‘On no account,’ said Lady Eleanor, staying her hand as she was about to ring the bell, ‘do not trouble yourself. I wanted Miss Ross to see them; she is so fond of children. May she go to the nursery and look at them just as they are? That is what she would really like, I know.’

Elsie was struck dumb, and dared not protest, though in truth she was by no means an ardent baby-lover. She had never lived much with little children, and though she felt kindly towards them, they had the effect of making her shy; she did not know how to converse with them. Mrs. Battisley looked annoyed, but asked Elsie if she thought she could find her way to the nursery. ‘It is upstairs, the first turning to the right,’ she said.

Elsie found her way without difficulty, as the sounds of infantile woe, which issued from the upstairs landing, showed plainly in what direction the nursery lay. As she opened the door, she became aware that the atmosphere was worse by many degrees than that of the drawing-room, and that the small room was positively crowded with little figures. The nurse, a cheerful-looking person in a flannel apron, rose to receive her, continuing to pat the baby’s back with one hand.

‘How do you do, nurse?’ said Elsie shyly. ‘Mrs. Battisley said I might come and see the children. Are they having their tea?’ And she looked around, wondering what had better be her next remark.

Four or five sickly-looking children sat at the table,

eating bread and treacle, or rather smearing it upon their cheeks ; while one little boy, apparently the black sheep of the flock, lay on his face on the floor, roaring at the top of his voice, and drumming on the carpet with his boots.

‘Yes, miss,’ said the nurse, ‘we are at tea. Master Cyril, stop that noise this moment. Miss Genevieve, take your fingers out of your mouth, and come and kiss the lady. You are very fond of children, I suppose, miss?’

‘Yes,’ said Elsie, when she had succeeded in finding a spot free from treacle on Miss Genevieve’s countenance ; then having, at the nurse’s bidding, gone through the like ceremony with the other four, and asked their names, she ventured to look at the baby, which now lay quiet, sucking its bottle.

‘It is a nice little thing,’ she said. ‘Is it a boy or a girl?’

‘A girl, miss—Violet Claribel. Should you like to ’old her, miss?’

‘Oh, don’t take away her bottle,’ said Elsie, ‘she likes it.’

But the nurse, having given up her chair to Elsie, placed the baby, bottle and all, triumphantly on her lap, and it was not until Violet Claribel showed imminent symptoms of choking that Elsie hastily returned her to the nurse and took leave, without having addressed the remark which she feared was expected of her to Master Cyril, whose position on the floor remained unchanged.

Lady Eleanor took her departure as soon as Elsie came down, and heaved a long sigh of relief when she found herself once more in the carriage. ‘Well!’ she asked when she had recovered a little, ‘what did you think of the children? Did you see them *all*?’

‘Yes,’ answered Elsie, ‘there are a great many. I thought them—I did not like them very much ; but you know, Lady Eleanor, I am not really fond of children.’

‘No?’ said Lady Eleanor carelessly—‘no more am I. And what did you think of the house?’

‘I did not think it at all a nice house,’ replied Elsie with decision.

‘A poky little place, isn’t it?’ said Lady Eleanor.

‘Yes, and it smelt—but one ought not to say such things,’ said Elsie, checking herself. ‘I don’t suppose poor Mrs. Battisley can help it; she seems to have so many troubles.’

Lady Eleanor smiled a little, but did not speak until they had almost reached home; then she turned to Elsie and said very seriously: ‘You have seen now what people who marry young, and without much means, invariably come to.’

CHAPTER II.

‘Admonish a friend : for many times it is a slander, and believe not every tale.’

LADY ELEANOR’S schemes were not so deep-laid but that they might have been perceived by any one less unsuspecting than Elsie. Furthermore, she could do nothing without a confidant. She did not take any of her nieces into her counsels ; Rosamond was too sharp-sighted for her, and Constance and Blanche too much occupied with themselves. Her plans and wishes were therefore reserved for her husband’s somewhat heedless ears ; and she took very good care that he should be her sole companion on her drive to Wroxbury the next day.

‘Elsie had no letter from David this morning, Frederick,’ she remarked when she was seated beside her husband in his mail-phaeton.

‘Indeed ? What do you infer from that, my dear Eleanor ?’

‘Why, it is now three weeks since she has had a letter, and if she were to take offence, and a coolness were to arise, I really don’t think the girl would be to blame.’

‘Some unforeseen cause——’ began Mr. Fitzgerald.

‘Oh, nonsense ! it has been a foolish engagement from beginning to end, and if she takes my advice she will break it off. I would just as soon now, for her own sake, she did not get a letter—she will only be the more disappointed afterwards.’

‘Disappointed if David marries the young lady in India ? I cannot think *that* would be a desirable connection.’

‘How stupid you are, Frederick ! I declare one might

as well talk to a—caravan !’ said Lady Eleanor, whose eye had roamed over the surrounding prospect until it lighted on a suitable comparison. ‘I should hope I knew David better than to suppose there is a grain of truth in that ridiculous story of Mrs. Freeman’s. I merely mean that I consider Elsie Ross totally unsuitable for David in every way. She is a very nice girl—I don’t wish to detract from any one. If Lionel were a year or two older——’

Lionel !’ exclaimed Mr. Fitzgerald. ‘My dear Eleanor, why, he is only eighteen, and as idle and careless a young scapegrace——’

‘Lionel was nineteen in June, and you need not raise your voice so much—you will frighten the horses. I only say, *if* he were a year or two older. *And I say it*, to show how little personal feeling I have on the subject. My children’s good is the only thing *I* consider.’

Nothing more was said on the matter until they had finished their business in Wroxbury; then Lady Eleanor laid her hand upon the reins—

‘Let us go this way, and avoid the High Street,’ she said. ‘It is a short cut, though it is dirty, and I am perished with cold; do let us get home quickly.’

Mr. Fitzgerald obeyed, and they had reached the outskirts of the town, when he suddenly pulled up with an expression of annoyance—

‘Dear ! I forgot to call at the post-office. How could we neglect such an important piece of work? Had we gone through the High Street, as I wished, this would not have happened.’

‘It was rather stupid, Frederick,’ said his wife complacently, ‘but it can’t be helped now. You are not going to turn in this narrow lane ! I cannot have it—the horses will rear, and we shall be upset, besides, what does it matter?’

‘But the afternoon letters,’ said Mr. Fitzgerald, ‘and there is still a chance of Miss Ross hearing from David, you said.’

‘No, there is not; at least, it is most unlikely. My letter to David is half written, and will have to be posted

to-night. I can't have her mind unsettled any more. Drive on, I insist upon it.'

Mr. Fitzgerald did not, in truth, care to have the trouble of turning back, especially as the light was waning and the roads beginning to freeze; so he drove on, after again bemoaning his forgetfulness.

'You need not tell Elsie Ross you forgot the letters,' said his wife, when they drew up at the hall door. 'She would think it so unfeeling of you—which it was, perhaps; but she can quite well wait till to-morrow morning.'

On going indoors, Lady Eleanor found Elsie sitting in the parlour with Rosamond and little Mona. The child had brought out her favourite picture-book, *Struwwelpeter*, which had been one of Lionel's nursery treasures, to show to Elsie, who was reading the rhymes aloud to her. She stopped, and looked up expectant.

'Well, Aunt Eleanor,' said Rosamond, 'you look cold. What have you brought us in the way of gossip?'

'Nothing at all,' was the answer. 'I did not meet a soul I knew. It is freezing hard, and the roads are getting quite slippery.'

'No letters even?' said Rosamond. 'I am pining for home news. So is Miss Ross, I sec,' darting a keen glance at the girl.

'Well, none of us have got any,' replied her aunt shortly. 'Why, Mona, I think that is cousin Lionel's old book. Ask Miss Ross to read to you about the naughty little boy who would not eat his soup.'

Lady Eleanor's conscience smote her for the deception she had practised, but she was pleased to see that Elsie did not, at all events, show her disappointment openly. She read that story and several others, with a smiling face, and apparent unconcern. By and by Lady Eleanor gave her a meaning look, observing: 'I must go to my boudoir, and finish my letter to David;' and after a short interval Elsie rose and followed her.

'Lady Eleanor,' she said as she came in—'is it about that report you are writing to David?'

'Certainly,' was the reply.

'Then,' said Elsie, 'I have been thinking it over, and I would rather that you did not say anything about me in your letter. You see, it is right for you to ask him, as you are his mother, but for me—I do not like to seem to insult him by any suspicion, so I would rather, please, not send a message.'

'Very well, my dear,' said Lady Eleanor rather coldly, 'I quite appreciate your motives. It is time this went to the post,' she added, and rang the bell. She then hastily wrote the concluding words, adding as a postscript, 'Elsie Ross very properly declines to send you any message.'

Having addressed the letter, she gave it to the servant, who stood waiting, with an injunction to send it to the village post-office at once.

Elsie remained a minute, wondering whether she had done right; she almost wished she had written to David herself, but it was evidently too late now, besides, she had no heart to write. She had felt so certain of her letter coming that afternoon, and now the darkest misgivings filled her mind. Either David must be ill, or he had forgotten her; and unable any longer to repress her tears she left the boudoir hastily and went to her own room, trying to gain composure enough to appear as usual in the evening. In this she succeeded pretty well, and as one or two neighbours had come in to dinner it was easy to maintain an indifferent conversation. But it was an unspeakable relief when they went away, and the party separated for the night; when, alone with her own thoughts, she need no longer keep up the semblance of gaiety, when she might cry if she liked, unheard and undisturbed. She had scarcely had time to undress, however, and was standing before the fire unplaiting her long hair, when she was startled by a tap at her door. For a moment she was frightened; she had never quite forgotten Lady Eleanor's remark about noises, and her 'Come in' was uttered tremulously. But no ghost made its appearance; only a small woman's figure in a white dressing-gown, with dark wavy hair gathered into a thick loose plait, hanging over its shoulders. It was Lady Seathwaite.

'May I come in?' she said. 'I am not a very good sleeper, and if you are not tired, I should be glad to have a chat with you. Do you mind?'

At any other time Elsie would have been as much pleased as surprised by Rosamond's voluntarily coming to sit with her; to-night she would have much preferred to be alone, but made her visitor welcome, and placed her in the big arm-chair beside the fire.

'I daresay you think me very impertinent,' said Rose, as she regarded Elsie's downcast face; 'but you seem to me a poor little solitary thing, and I want to help you—if I can. Why are you so afraid of Aunt Eleanor, Elsie?'

'I was rather rude to her the night I came,' replied Elsie slowly, 'because she gave me some advice I did not like. I thought she would be offended, although she was not. But I am always rather afraid of her—I don't know why; I think it is because she is so beautiful.'

Rosamond listened with a half-amused smile, and seemed determined to draw the girl out.

'Then you make a great mistake—not in thinking her beautiful, for she is—no other word would express it—but in being afraid of her. Aunt Eleanor is not clever, you know; nobody minds what she says, and no sensible person ever takes her advice.'

These last words were said emphatically, and Elsie looked up in wonder. 'Why not?' she asked.

'Because she would never take the trouble to give advice unless she had some private reason,' said Rosamond curtly. She sat looking at the girl steadily, still with a half-smile about the corners of her mouth, and Elsie returned her gaze, wondering, perplexed, and yet fascinated.

'I did not take her advice,' she said; 'at least, only part of it. It—was about David.'

'Do not tell me more than you like,' said Lady Seathwaite, 'but if it would be any use to you, Elsie, you may trust me safely. I have experience'—she smiled rather bitterly—'and I have no motive or scheme in the matter.'

'I do trust you,' said Elsie; 'I can't help it. I have not heard from David for three mails'—her voice shook in

spite of herself—‘and Lady Eleanor thinks—Lady Seathwaite, do you know anything of David? Can you think of any reason?’

Rosamond looked at the girl with great compassion, and taking both her hands, she drew her close to her.

‘My poor child,’ she said, ‘I know nothing of your David, except that he is nice and a gentleman; that I believe firmly. So that I am not exactly prepared to espouse the Miss Pratt theory—at least, I would give him the benefit of the doubt, if I were you. You have not written to break off your engagement, have you?’

‘No, no, I have not,’ said Elsie, inexpressibly comforted by Rosamond’s view of the matter; ‘I would not even send a message in Lady Eleanor’s letter, in case he might think I suspected him.’

‘She asked you to send a message, did she?’

‘Yes, she thought it would be better for me to send a message in her letter than to write myself.’

‘You don’t know what she said in her letter, of course?’

‘It was about the report of his engagement; Lady Eleanor thought it necessary to inquire about it.’

‘Elsie,’ said Rosamond, after a few moments’ thought, ‘I don’t know exactly what to say, not knowing David very well, but I don’t somehow put much faith in this report, which Aunt Eleanor makes so much of. If you really don’t believe it, as you say, why not write to David as usual?’

‘I wish I had,’ said Elsie, ‘and I thought of putting a note instead of a message inside Lady Eleanor’s letter, but I found there was not time.’

‘Not time, child!’ cried Rosamond, ‘why, the letters don’t leave the village till eight to-morrow morning. I don’t believe hers is gone yet.’

‘Yes it is—she sent it to the post at once, and was very particular about it. I certainly understood there was not time.’

Rosamond’s next proceeding filled Elsie with astonishment. ‘This is great fun,’ she said, clapping her hands; and, springing off her seat, she began to execute a kind of

dance in the middle of the room. Presently she sat down again, and patted Elsie's cheek.

'You think I am mad, I suppose,' she said, 'but it is quite the contrary; a light has begun to break in upon my understanding. Aunt Eleanor wants to make you and David mutually disgusted with each other, and this is the way she takes to accomplish it.'

'I know she would like to break off our engagement,' observed Elsie astutely.

'Then why do you let her, you little goose? Write to David now, bring the letter to my room when you have done it; my maid shall post it the first thing in the morning.'

'How good you are to me!' said Elsie—'but stay'—laying a detaining hand upon Rose's arm as she was about to leave the room—'I told Lady Eleanor I would not write unless I heard from David: I don't think it is quite fair to write without her knowledge.'

'You may hear by to-morrow morning's post, since you are so scrupulous,' said Rosamond. 'The letters were never called for this afternoon; I have made out so much from Mr. Fitzgerald. So now I will leave you to make up your mind.'

Elsie did not hesitate long; she felt indignant at being thus deceived, and wrote as quickly as she could a short but characteristic letter to her lover, describing her visit to Alkerton without touching on any of the annoyances she had met with, and speaking warmly of Lady Seathwaite's kindness to her. She added, that David's silence had made her a little anxious, lest he should perhaps be ill, but that there was no doubt a letter for her at Chippingham, which Aunt Caroline would forward.

Elsie would have liked, in her present frame of mind, to confront Lady Eleanor with this letter in her hand, and upbraid her with her perfidy; but this was not to be thought of, for two reasons. In the first place, she could not betray Rose, who would dislike nothing more than being suspected of helping the oppressed; and in the second place, she could scarcely rouse her hostess, to say nothing of Mr.

Fitzgerald, in the middle of the night for such a purpose. She disliked the idea of keeping the secret from her, and yet she disliked far more the thought that David might fancy she suspected him. 'For if he once thinks so,' thought Elsie, 'he must think so for ever: I can never clear myself, for how could I tell him that his own mother told lies in order to separate us?' Something of this she expressed to Lady Seathwaite when she came to her room with the letter.

'Oh, child!' said Rosamond sadly, 'I hope I have not misled you—I hope David is worthy of it; but I cannot see a creature in a trap and not try to let it out.'

'How could you guess it?' asked Elsie.

'I know Aunt Eleanor,' was the answer, 'and I have had experience, as I told you. But go to bed, little cousin, we will talk more another time.'

They kissed each other, and Elsie retreated noiselessly to her own room.

CHAPTER III.

Though hopeless love finds comfort in despair,
It never can endure a rival's bliss !
But soft—I am observed.'

ELSIE received the expected letter the next morning, enclosed in one from Aunt Caroline. It was written in David's usual cheerful and light-hearted strain, and he seemed perfectly unaware that any evil interpretation could be put upon his conduct. He had had a slight touch of fever, he said, but was now all right again. Not a word about Miss Pratt or any other lady, but a good deal about steeple-chases and polo, and he appeared delighted with the prospect of soon seeing active service in Afghanistan, a joy in which Elsie scarcely sympathised. The letter was as affectionate as usual, or even rather more so, and was perfectly satisfactory to its recipient, though not, apparently, to Lady Eleanor ; for, on Elsie's reading her portions of it, she only remarked, with her usual logical precision, that David's not mentioning Miss Pratt did not prove that there was no such person,—but rather the reverse, to her mind. The last clause was put in as an after-thought, in order to counteract a distinct tone of triumph which she detected in Elsie's voice. Lady Eleanor always made a point of paying out, as it were, any one who had offended her by word or deed, either immediately or as soon after as she conveniently could ; she never neglected it, and, it may be presumed, looked upon it almost as a duty. In the present case, as Lionel was expected that day, and she was therefore in an especially pleasant and gracious mood, it was no spite or malice, but rather the strict principle of justice by which

her conduct was always actuated which prompted this retort. In spite of herself she had taken a decided fancy to Elsie, and preferred her company to that of any of her nieces; the girl's very presence in the room soothed and pleased her, and she would have liked to have her always at hand to listen to her grievances, and to relieve her of small troubles. The liking was mutual; Elsie's former fear of Lady Eleanor showed that she had a charm for her, and the girl had a certain clinging affection for David's mother which all the last night's disclosures failed to weaken. Perhaps Elsie would have kept her anger longer had she not reflected that she had been a deceiver in her turn; but whatever was the reason, the two were as good friends as ever.

Now that Elsie had got rid of her fears, and had found a friend in Lady Seathwaite, she began to enjoy her visit thoroughly. Constance and Blanche were now very civil to her, and Rosamond made no secret of her friendship. She did not talk much to Elsie in public, but would invite her to take walks with her, or to go with her to the nursery, where they would hold long conferences with little Mona for a third. Elsie soon became fond of the child, and liked to watch and admire her friend's pretty ways with her and with all children, whom she seemed to understand instinctively; and when the little Freemans or other juvenile neighbours came to tea with Mona, Rosamond generally managed to come and play with them. At other times Elsie talked to Rose freely, as she had never talked to any woman before; her innocent confidences being received always with sympathy, often with peals of laughter; then Elsie would laugh too, till any of the others who happened to be passing would wonder how any one *could* be so absurd and frivolous. For Lady Eleanor and Constance were not mirthfully inclined, and Blanche, though she could not help laughing sometimes, held a theory just then that laughter was rather beneath the dignity of a reasonable being. Blanche's theories were very strong at the time, but were liable to variation.

Lionel's coming made a pleasant variety, and he was welcomed by every one. He brought his cousin, Lord

Heathfield, with him, a youth about his own age, who was also at Christchurch. He was a quiet, gentlemanlike young man, whose appearance might be described by negatives. He was neither tall nor short, fair nor dark, plain nor handsome; nothing was striking about him except his extreme neatness and tidiness, and his beautifully brushed hair, which he wore parted in the middle. He was an only child, the much loved and carefully brought up son of Lady Eleanor's brother, the Earl of Lynmouth; and having been singularly well behaved from his infancy, he had always been held up as a model for Lionel's imitation. Lady Eleanor was, or seemed to be, really attached to her nephew, and made what her son was pleased to consider 'the most unnecessary fuss' about him. Lionel himself appeared to be well in health, and was overflowing with spirits. He delighted in playing practical jokes upon Heathfield, teasing his parents, and talking nonsense with his cousins, while with Elsie he assumed a brotherly and protecting air, keeping a watchful eye on her, and reproving her if he saw anything amiss in her conduct. He disapproved of her intimacy with Rosamond, whose temper, he gravely assured her, was 'diabolical;' but as Elsie observed that he always found fault with her when she spoke to any one except himself, she paid no heed to his representations.

It was quite true that Rosamond, like the rest of the family, had her moods: some days she would be depressed, and would scarcely speak; at other times a teasing and malicious spirit seemed to possess her, and she would take delight in making the most cutting speeches. Elsie was seldom the victim of her sarcasms, more often they were reserved for Lady Eleanor or her own sisters; but Elsie soon learnt that the mental atmosphere at Alkerton, if not as oppressive as that of Chippingham, could occasionally be quite as unpleasant; for there were days on which Lady Eleanor was, as Lionel phrased it, 'not to be trifled with,' Rosamond depressed, Mr. Fitzgerald irritating and captious, Lionel offended or morose, and the girls more or less disagreeable. On these occasions she longed more than ever for David, whose cheerful, sunshiny disposition contrasted

so strangely with the cloudy, unsettled moods of his family, and decided that David must resemble his father, as Lionel did his mother, in character as well as in face.

'Lord Heathfield has no temper,' she reflected, 'but then he is utterly devoid of tact.' Still she liked talking to Heathfield, and was pleased with his extreme politeness and quiet unselfish ways. Lionel soon found occasion to reprove her for this also.

'Does Lord Heathfield hunt?' she inquired innocently enough, as she and Lionel were watching the sunset from the lodge-gate one afternoon, hoping that the frost would not be too hard for hunting the next day. Lionel, who was engaged in breaking the ice on a cart-rut with his stick, did not answer till Elsie repeated her question, when he replied with severity—

'You take too much interest in Heathfield; but if you imagine that he will be left at home with you all day to-morrow, you are mistaken.'

'I don't imagine anything,' said Elsie hotly; 'but I think you are very rude, Lionel. If you can't answer a civil question——'

'Be calm,' said Lionel. 'Keep your temper, I beg. You asked me, I think, if Lord Heathfield hunts?'

Elsie moved a few steps away without answering, and Lionel, pursuing her, patted her arm soothingly.

'Yes, yes, he hunts,' said he, in a mock confidential tone. 'His parents wish him to hunt, so he hunts. It is a duty which his position demands—Hallo! here he is.'

At this moment they were joined by the unconscious subject of their remarks, who said to Elsie—

'Is it not too cold for you to be out, Miss Ross?—at least to loiter about? You really ought not, Lionel, to allow Miss Ross to get so chilled.'

'Why did you not bring her a railway rug and a foot-warmer, then?' retorted his cousin. 'You really are most thoughtless, my dear fellow. Never go unprovided with them where you are likely to meet a lady.'

On their way to the house Heathfield asked Elsie if she would ride or drive to the meet the next morning. 'If you

ride,' said he, 'it would give me great pleasure to escort you home whenever you are tired.'

Elsie replied that she hoped to ride, as Lionel had promised to lend her his little mare, and Constance her habit. 'But you must not think of coming back with us, Lord Heathfield,' she said. 'Blanche and I can surely find our own way home.'

'I assure you,' protested Heathfield, 'nothing would give me greater pleasure.'

The frost gave way during the night, and the next morning, though damp and foggy, was suitable for hunting; and Elsie put on her habit with a feeling of pleasurable excitement. The meet was about four miles from Alkerton, and Lady Eleanor particularly desired the girls to come straight back, and not to follow the hounds, partly for fear of accidents, and partly because she did not consider they had a sufficient escort. Blanche promised to attend to her aunt's directions, and Elsie, who knew nothing of hunting, determined to avoid mistakes by keeping close to her companion. They had to wait some minutes for Lionel, who was usually late, and by the time he came Blanche and Elsie were already mounted, the former on a steady old hunter, the latter on Lionel's little black mare Phyllis, who fidgeted and pranced with eagerness to be off. Heathfield, as soon as he mounted, drew near in order to soothe her, but Lionel speedily interfered.

'Elsie,' said he in a warning voice, 'whatever you do, don't go near Heathfield on that mare—it is as much as his leg is worth. She perfectly hates that horse of his, and will kick him if you don't look out.'

'I will ride with Blanche then, whose legs are both on the other side,' said Elsie.

'H'm, better ride on with me, and let them follow. As the horse is mine, I am willing to take the risk.'

Elsie having agreed to this magnanimous proposal, the two rode on in front, leaving Blanche to follow with Heathfield, and when he thought they were out of earshot Lionel asked her, 'Did I hear you promise to come straight home from the meet?'

'Blanche promised, and of course I will go back with her.'

'Well, Elsie,' said Lionel, 'attend to me. If Heathfield offers to go back with you, don't let him.'

Elsie looked a little puzzled. 'I don't want him to, and I don't suppose he wants to, but if he *should* insist upon it, how can I prevent him?'

'Any well brought up girl would know how to prevent him,' said Lionel, with a severely virtuous air. 'It would be most improper, and I wonder how you could let him make the proposal. May I ask what amuses you?' as Elsie broke into a laugh.

'Oh, Lionel, don't be offended; you are always being offended, and it is so tiresome—but the idea of Lord Heathfield doing anything improper was too much for me!'

'Well, it is not your fault if he doesn't,' said Lionel. 'You needn't go on like that,' he continued sulkily; 'you don't suppose it is pleasant for me to have to speak to you in this way. As David's brother, it is my painful duty to—to be in a position to—take her short by the head, she is going to shy at that muck-heap—to advise you.'

'Lionel,' said Elsie, 'it is no part of your duty to David to find fault with me every minute like this. He never did it himself, and I don't believe he would wish it done.'

'Never did it himself!' said Lionel, raising his eyes to heaven. 'Merciful Providence! what will she say next? David is an awfully particular beggar about certain things, and you know you were always fighting at St. Leonards, if I remember right. Wait till you are married. I shudder, Elsie'—here Lionel shook convulsively in his saddle, and turned a solemn gaze upon his companion—'I shudder when I think of those domestic broils.'

Elsie only laughed gaily, and this time Lionel did not chide her merriment. After a while he said—

'If you really want to go back directly I—I will go with you myself, if you like.'

'Dear boy,' said Elsie, much touched by this act of self-sacrifice, 'do not think of such a thing—you, who are so fond of hunting! I would rather follow you all day and tumble off half a dozen times.'

'Would you?' said Lionel, his face lighting up. 'Then come on. No fear of your tumbling off, you really sit very fairly well, considering.—Hallo! we are late—the hounds are gone, but I know what cover they are drawing. Follow me, never mind the others.'

At this moment, however, they heard the galloping of horses behind them, and the other two rode up.

'You see, Lionel,' said Heathfield, 'that you have made us late. We waited full ten minutes at the door for you, and now we have lost the hounds.'

'Lost your grandmother!' retorted Lionel. 'They are all down at that cover, as you may see if you use your eyes. Follow me, all of you—we'll take a short cut,' and so saying Lionel leaped the ditch into an adjoining field, followed promptly by Elsie.

Heathfield attempted a remonstrance, to which Blanche replied, 'Stuff and nonsense! I'm not going home without seeing something, at any rate.'

At that moment the fox must have broken cover, for the hounds, giving tongue, streamed away, followed by the whole field. The line Lionel had taken soon placed him among the foremost riders, and Elsie kept close to him as long as she could. The little mare was so well trained that she had no difficulty in managing her, and the girl at first forgot everything in the excitement of the hunt. By and by, however, she remembered Blanche and her promise to Lady Eleanor, and drawing back a little to look for the others, she lost sight of Lionel. Still she followed the stream of hunters; they were now going through some very heavy ground, and as they passed through a gap into a cart road she became aware, by a clinking sound, that one of Phyllis's shoes was loose, and presently it flew off altogether with a ringing noise. In distress she pulled up, and looked round, not knowing exactly what to do; one rider after another passed her, Blanche among them, spat-

tering her with mud as they went by ; but she did not see Heathfield anywhere.

They had all passed now, Elsie stood up in her stirrup, and surveyed the country in all directions—not a creature was in sight. ‘There is only one thing to be done now,’ thought she, ‘and that is to go home. If I could only find my way to the village we passed through ; there is sure to be a blacksmith’s forge there, and they could put on the shoe.’

She dismounted, picked up the shoe, and hung it on to the pommel of her saddle, then led Phyllis back to the field they had just quitted, picking her way cautiously amongst the mud-holes. Between the road and the field was a stile, by means of which she managed with some difficulty to get on again, and then rode gently back, looking out for gaps and carefully avoiding stony places. The way seemed long, but she did succeed in reaching the village at last, and in finding the smith, who undertook to set all to rights in a very short time.

Elsie took all this very philosophically, but rather disliked waiting in the village, where she was an object of so much interest to all the idlers, and where several well-disposed persons were anxious to prove that she was severely hurt, had been thrown from her horse, and required instant medical assistance. Having, after what seemed to be an interminable time, got rid of these philanthropists and found herself again in the saddle, she proceeded joyfully on her way, and was not far from Alkerton when she met Heathfield, who rode hastily towards her with a countenance full of anxiety.

‘Miss Ross ! thank heaven you are safe ! I trust you have met with no accident ?’

‘Phyllis cast a shoe,’ replied Elsie with composure. ‘I had to take her to the smithy. I am sorry you were looking for me, Lord Heathfield.’

‘I have been distracted with anxiety on your account,’ said Heathfield pathetically. ‘The moment I missed you I turned and searched for you everywhere. Lionel, careless fellow ! never once looked behind him, and Blanche,

I sadly fear, has quite forgotten her promise to my aunt and has gone on with him. But now that *you* are safe my worst anxiety is assuaged.'

They reached Alkerton about three o'clock, and Elsie was rather coldly received by Lady Eleanor, who marked her displeasure, not by saying anything to her, but by extolling Heathfield's noble conduct in giving up his own hunting to look for her, which served to render the offences of the rest blacker by contrast.

Finding that Rosamond and Constance had gone out, Elsie changed her habit, put on her walking things, and went out in hopes of meeting them. This she failed to do, nor did she meet Lionel and Blanche, who came in during her absence; but before long she was joined by Heathfield, who entertained her with his conversation for nearly an hour and a half. Heathfield was very quiet in general society, but when he found a sympathetic listener his flow of talk never ceased, and Elsie was amused by the simplicity of his confidences. He described his home to her, and became eloquent on the subject of his parents' goodness and wisdom. This was the first Christmas in his life, he touchingly observed, that he had ever been separated from them, but they were then abroad, and it was their wish that he should accept their invitation to Alkerton, and endeavour to cultivate a little of his cousin Lionel's taste for field-sports.

'And I cannot regret having come, Miss Ross, since I have had the pleasure of making your acquaintance. You understand me so well! How I wish you knew my mother; but you will be sure to see her when you come to Lyn Court, which you will do, I hope, before very long, when she is able to claim you as a—as one of the family.'

Heathfield here lowered his voice, in delicate and confidential allusion to Elsie's approaching marriage with David, and as such she understood it.

'Thank you, Lord Heathfield,' she answered; 'I—hope so.'

His words, however, bore a different meaning to a listener who was concealed behind the bushes, for they

were now passing through the shrubbery on their way to the house. Lionel and Blanche had come in about half an hour before, and after a good scolding from Lady Eleanor, to which neither of them paid much attention, Lionel had demanded where Elsie was.

'There is no saying where she might have been,' was his mother's answer, 'if dear, unselfish Basil had not brought her in—at the botton of some ditch, most likely. None of you seem to consider,' she added, turning to Blanche, 'how exceedingly unpleasant it is for me to sit waiting here all day, expecting every moment to see you girls brought in on shutters, with your necks broken.'

'Where is Elsie, then,' asked Lionel, 'since she is neither in a ditch nor on a shutter?'

'Gone out walking, I believe; she can never sit quiet for two minutes together.'

Lionel, upon this, went out to find Elsie, and demand an explanation of her conduct in leaving him. He had not gone many steps from the house before he caught sight of her and Heathfield pacing slowly along in the dusk, apparently in earnest conversation, and so engrossed with one another that they did not see him. This sight made him so indignant that he hastily turned into a side-walk to avoid them; then something Heathfield said arrested his attention, and he listened eagerly, but only caught the last few sentences, after which their voices became indistinct.

On returning to the house Elsie went to the nursery to visit little Mona, who was in bed with a bad cold, and whilst she was with her Lionel came in. Mona was very fond of her cousin Lionel, who was always very kind and gentle with her. He sat down on the bed and began to talk and play with the child as usual; but when Elsie, who supposed he had not seen her, asked him if he had had a good day's sport, he first took no notice at all, and then affected not to hear.

'I beg your pardon, Miss Ross, did you speak?' he said at length, when Mona had called his attention to the fact that Elsie was addressing him. Elsie, thoroughly provoked at his caprices, left the nursery presently, and

laid wait for him at the foot of the stair, resolved, as she said to herself, 'to give him a good talking to' as soon as he came down. She had to nurse her wrath for about ten minutes, at the end of which time Lionel strolled leisurely out of the nursery, and was at once confronted by his cousin.

'Lionel, what is the meaning of this? I never saw such a boy as you are! What have I done to offend you now?'

'You needn't pretend that you don't know that.'

'I couldn't help leaving you,' said Elsie. 'Was it my fault that Phyllis cast a shoe? You ought to have seen that they were put on tighter.'

'Cast a shoe, did she?' said Lionel. 'Well, no doubt Heathfield's horse cast a shoe too?'

'No, no! I never even saw Lord Heathfield until just as I was coming home. If you would only let me *explain* to you, Lionel.'

'If you were to explain from now till to-morrow morning, it would make no difference,' said Lionel. 'When I think of the way you have behaved since——'

'I have done nothing since, except go for a walk.'

'*With* Heathfield.'

'No, I met him.'

'That was very curious,' said Lionel with a sneer. 'And it was quite an accident his proposing to you, of course.'

'Lionel, I don't think you are in your right mind. He never proposed to me—he would as soon think of proposing to that gong!'

'Nevertheless,' said Lionel, unmoved by this strong figure of speech, 'he did propose to you. I heard him with my own ears.'

'He—did—not.'

'He did! He did it in the shrubbery about half an hour ago.'

Elsie could only cast up her eyes and sigh. 'Well,' she said despairingly, 'I didn't hear him.'

'That was a pity,' said Lionel sarcastically.

He began to be a little staggered, and to think that possibly he had put a wrong interpretation upon what he had heard, but he would not let this appear for the world.

'And since when,' said Elsie, 'have your ears become so sharp that you hear things——'

'Which were not intended for them,' put in Lionel.

'No, which never happened. Where were you, perhaps, when you heard this?'

'Behind the laurel bushes in the shrubbery,' replied Lionel, fixing a stern look upon her.

'And do you consider it the part of an honourable young man to skulk behind bushes to listen to people's proposals?'

'I only heard one,' said Lionel, moving away. 'I'll do you the justice to say I did *not* hear you propose to Heathfield—I daresay you did though.'

'Oh, indeed!' said Elsie in high indignation, and turning, she walked off to the library to join the rest.

Lionel's morose looks when he made his appearance there also were attributed by his family to hunger, but neither tea nor buttered muffins had power to soothe his sullen mood. After tea his cousins asked him to play to them, which he ungraciously refused to do, and retired into a corner with a book. The others took no notice of him, nor did they seem to be affected by his ill-humour; all, including Elsie, looking perfectly happy and comfortable. Rosamond, who seemed in unusually high spirits that afternoon, was sitting on the rug with her back to the fire, talking with animation, and so amusingly that quite a circle of listeners collected round her. She was describing a visit which she and Constance had just paid at the Parsonage, and her clever mimicry kept the others in fits of laughter, until Lady Eleanor, not seeing any fun in it herself, put a stop to it.

'You are always turning up your nose at the people about here, Rosamond,' said she. 'I cannot see that they are any better about Seathwaite—worse, I should say—decidedly more vulgar. Besides, I do not think it right to

laugh at a clergyman; it is forbidden somewhere in the Bible, I think—at any rate I don't think it right.'

'Dear Aunt Eleanor, how good you are! I wish we were all as well versed in the Scriptures. I am sorry you don't like my stories, for now I am going to tell you another one—listen!' and Rosamond began another anecdote, at which even Lady Eleanor could not help laughing a little, but Lionel still sat gloomily reading, his book upside down, and Heathfield looked a little disapproving.

'Dear Basil,' said Lady Eleanor, 'now get some nice book and read to us. You used to repeat poetry so charmingly when you were a little boy. I never could get Lionel to care for it.'

Heathfield said he was accustomed to read aloud in the evening to his parents, and would be glad to oblige his aunt in any way she pointed out.

A question now arose as to what poetry should be read aloud. Some one suggested Tennyson, but Heathfield, after a search in the shelves, brought out a volume of Wordsworth, which he recommended as being 'more chaste.' He really read well, and thus the hour before dinner passed pleasantly enough to all but Lionel, who, after listening to the first few lines, rose and left the room with dignity.

Lady Eleanor began to feel a little anxious about the state of her son's health; his boyish illnesses used often to be preceded by fits of ill-humour, but she had hoped that he had out-grown them. She came to his room before dinner, and spoke to him seriously about his rudeness during his cousin's reading. 'Dear Heathfield is too good-tempered even to seem put out, but really, Lionel, you were quite insulting. It was as if you could not bear to listen, and I am sure nothing could be nicer.'

Lionel, in reply, informed his mother that 'it was one of his principles never to listen to rot'—so he designated his cousin's favourite poems; he found it deteriorated his whole moral nature; then abruptly changing the subject, he besought her to put a stop to the flirtation which was going on between Heathfield and Elsie. Lady Eleanor laughed at him.

'I don't see that there is anything going on,' she said, 'and if there were, it is no affair of yours. You can't be well, Lionel, or you would not be so fanciful. I hope you have not been hanging over Mona. Have you any feeling of sore throat?'

Lionel had been standing before the glass in his shirt-sleeves whilst his mother was speaking; he now turned round upon her with flashing eyes, and a hair-brush in each hand. 'Of course I have!' he replied, 'it is enough to give anybody a sore throat to see the way they go on; but you have none of you any proper feeling. I am sure I don't know what Heathfield's blessed parents will say to you, and as for David——'

'Lionel, dear, you are too foolish; don't excite yourself so. Elsie is going home in a day or two, and if Heathfield is a little taken with her, it will do him no harm. He is only nineteen, you know. But come, there is the dinner gong; do not dawdle, Lionel, you know your father hates you to be late.'

'Odd,' thought Lady Eleanor as she went downstairs, 'all the young men are quite foolish about that girl. There is Lionel now, quite jealous of Heathfield. Well, she would make a nice little daughter-in-law, if only it were Lionel instead of David. It is those clever women that I cannot stand, who are always seeing things that are not there.'

This last reflection was suggested by Rosamond, who had come downstairs behind her, and who said, as she smilingly put an arm round her neck, 'A penny for your thoughts, Aunt Eleanor! I can see you are revolving some dark scheme in your brain.'

Lionel did not speak to Elsie during the whole of that evening, and this made her very unhappy, as she expected to leave Alkerton in two days, and it might be long before she saw him again. The next morning she looked anxiously for some signs of relenting; he avoided her studiously, but more, she thought, from pride than from ill-will, and seeing him loitering aimlessly about in the shrubbery, she resolved to make it up with him.

'Lionel, dear,' said she affectionately, putting her arm within his, 'what o'clock is it?'

Lionel regarded her with a suppressed smile of triumph, and pulled out his watch.

'It is now,' said he, 'the witching hour of ten minutes to one. What is your reason for asking?'

'Only,' said Elsie, 'that you said once you would show me the pigs, and I thought there might be time before luncheon.'

'Come on then,' said Lionel with alacrity, and pulling his cap over his forehead, he set out at a good pace.

The others watched them from the windows with some amusement, knowing that they had not been on speaking terms; for it was a standing joke that the two were always quarrelling, and yet never could be separated, and although they might go forth apparently the best of friends, they were apt to fall out by the way, and if they came in together (which they rarely did), it was generally with the width of the road between them. Lionel now walked off through the muddy fields so fast that it was difficult for Elsie, who had to pick her steps, to keep up with him.

'Come along, Elsie,' said he admonishingly. 'If you really want to see the pigs, there must be no stopping to look about you. Mind your feet—it's a little damp just here.'

He marched on through a perfect sea of mud, which lay at the entrance of the farm enclosure, and when he reached the other side, cast a look back to see whether his companion would venture to follow; but perceiving that Elsie, having 'kilted' her dress, was prepared to encounter the passage without a murmur, he relented, and desired her to wait until he laid down a plank for her to step on. He then opened the door of a yard, and they found themselves in the presence of a company of curious looking red-haired pigs with black spots, which collected round them, grunting and squeaking.

'Well, what do you think of them?' asked Lionel.

Elsie was doubtful. 'I am not a *very* good judge of

pigs,' she said. 'If they were cattle I should know better ; but I don't think them so handsome as the Berkshire pigs my father keeps.'

'That's all you know about it !' returned Lionel. 'This is the genuine old English swine, descended from the herd which Gurth and Wamba kept, beneath these spreading'—here he looked up, but as there were no oaks above his head, or any other trees, he substituted—'skies. Come and look at the young ones.'

He opened the door of a little thatched shed, where lay the mother sow surrounded by her family.

'Ah, these are pretty !' cried Elsie, 'they are the colour of tortoiseshell kittens—and what active little beasts. Poor old lady !'—addressing the sow affectionately. 'Lend me your stick, Lionel, till I scratch her back.'

'*Till* you scratch her back !' said Lionel, turning away his head in affected disgust, as he yielded up his cane. What a *fearful* Scotticism !'

'Oh, Lionel !' said Elsie rather inattentively, as she leaned forward to reach the sow's other side ; 'you know I never speak Scotch.'

They were half way on their walk home before Elsie suddenly observed with complacency, 'I am generally taken for an Englishwoman.'

'Oh, are you ?' said Lionel. 'Now, I daresay David told you that—there's nothing that fellow won't say. I wouldn't have the lies he tells upon my conscience if you paid me !' and Lionel put his head back, and snuffed the air with a proud consciousness of integrity.

'Lionel !' said Elsie firmly, 'I cannot allow you to say things like that about David, even in fun. It is not even as if he were in this country. If you wish to abuse David, you must walk with somebody else.'

But Lionel only walked on smiling, and declined to quarrel. He possessed his mother's stern sense of justice, which led him to pay Elsie out for her former offence, but this done, he considered that she was punished sufficiently.

CHAPTER IV.

' Before the days of change still is it so ;
By a divine instinct men's minds mistrust
Ensuing danger ; as by proof we see,
The waters swell before a boisterous storm,
But leave it all to God.'

ELSIE had fully intended returning to Chippingham for Christmas ; but she was so beset with entreaties to remain, that she wrote to Aunt Caroline for another week's leave of absence, which was graciously accorded to her. She was glad of this, for she had rather disliked the idea of Christmas at Chippingham, with all its bustle of church decorations, school treats, and parish teas. Last year she had quite enjoyed them, for David had been there, but she dreaded going through it all without him, and being consoled with by all her friends on this circumstance.

A day or two before Christmas an addition to the party at Alkerton arrived in the person of Mr. Douglas Ferrars, Constance Mortimer's accepted suitor. He was a wealthy, middle-aged man, a successful barrister, and possessed besides of a good private fortune. Lady Eleanor always spoke of him as a 'very civil little man,' and this described him well. He had no turn for field sports of any kind, and as he did not smoke, he usually sat with the ladies, and took walks with Constance, to whom he behaved with great deference. Neither Rosamond nor Blanche seemed to have much regard for their future brother-in-law, indeed Rose was often exceedingly rude to him, and he disliked her proportionally. But every one else tolerated him, and Constance was filled with serene self-importance, and, it is

to be presumed, returned the politely expressed affection of her *fiancé*.

It was Christmas eve, and a bright frosty afternoon. The engaged pair had gone for a walk, and the others had waited to give them a start, and collected at the window to watch and comment upon them as they issued forth. Lady Eleanor, entering the library, found them thus employed.

‘Now I call it perfectly disgraceful of you all to stand spying upon poor Constance in that way,’ she said. ‘How would you like it yourselves? It is nothing but idle, vulgar curiosity—I am sure Mr. Ferrars is most harmless. If you really want something to do, I wish some of you, at least, would walk to Bulcote and inquire for Mr. Freeman, he has got erysipelas in his face.’

All declared their willingness to start on this errand, but as they said they were too large a party, each eagerly proposed to be the one to stay at home. At length Rosamond and Elsie set out, escorted by Lionel, while Heathfield and Blanche went to see if the ice on the pond would soon be fit for skating.

‘Do you think we need go in?’ said Rosamond. ‘Won’t it do just to inquire at the door?’

Elsie thought it would, but Lionel, to his cousins’ surprise, insisted on going in, to which they yielded the more readily, as it was impossible to make the faithful Blencowe understand their questions. They found Mrs. Freeman alone, the young people having gone to decorate the church. She received them with her usual simple friendliness, and said that her husband was better, but not yet able to see any one. At this Lionel’s face fell perceptibly.

‘Should you mind taking a note for me to Lady Eleanor?’ said Mrs. Freeman, as they rose to go. ‘I had just begun to write it as you came in. Will you sit down a moment, Lady Seathwaite, whilst I finish it? I am sorry to keep you waiting,’ she said as she wrote, ‘it is about a marriage Lady Eleanor was interested in, which has taken place in India, but after all it is no one she knows, my sister had made a mistake in the name.’

Lady Seathwaite turned her beautiful face, and slowly

winked her eye at Elsie, while Lionel sat perfectly still, apparently absorbed in thought.

Once out of the house, the three looked at one another, and Rosamond held up the note in triumph.

Lionel took it from her. 'It is impossible,' said he with solemnity, 'to stand this state of suspense any longer. For Elsie's sake, it is absolutely necessary to know what is inside.' And so saying, he calmly tore open the note, and began to read it aloud.

Elsie protested. 'Lionel, how dare you open letters? I—I don't need to know, I don't *want* to know what is inside.' But Lionel did not take the least notice.

Mrs. Freeman's note was somewhat unintelligible, and was full of excuses and expressions of regret, very hastily written, but enclosed was a scrap of an Indian letter from her sister, on which Lionel read—

"Miss Pratt's marriage took place last week at the English church at"—Jumbledebad, it looks like—"and I am told the bride really looked very well, though I am not an admirer of her *style*. All our efforts were useless, as the Pratts followed the poor foolish young man all the way to"—to—Punch—Poon—I can't read it, never mind"—said Lionel breaking off—"and the father demanded what his intentions were, so there was no getting off. I made a sadly stupid mistake in my former letter, the bridegroom's name is Leslie, not Lindsay; he calls himself Leslie of Cowiebyres, although I understand the property is sold. There is a Mr. Lindsay, also a Scotchman, in the regiment, which may have confused me, though I know both young men perfectly well. The bridegroom, Mr. Norman Leslie, is short and red-haired; his wife is about three inches taller. She is handsome but *bold-looking*; I hope they may be happy, although for my part"—here the sheet was torn in two.

'What a gossip the woman must be!' cried Rosamond. 'Well, Lionel, so you are not to have Miss Pratt for a sister-in-law—what a disappointment! Now give me back the letter.'

'No, no, leave it with me, I'll explain it to my mother.

I'll just go on in front, and set her mind at rest ; you follow at your own pace,' and Lionel started off at headlong speed.

'He is up to some mischief,' said Rosamond shrewdly, 'but never mind, Aunt Eleanor deserves it.'

'Will she be angry at his opening the letter?' asked Elsie.

'Not a bit ; she might have been if any one else had done it, but Lionel may do as he pleases.'

When they reached the house they found Lady Eleanor in a state of considerable perturbation, not having yet deciphered Mrs. Freeman's note, and having been assured by her son that that lady had given them a circumstantial account of David's marriage with Miss Pratt, which had just been solemnised by the Bishop of Calcutta, the bride's father keeping a drawn sword in his hand during the ceremony, to prevent any attempt at escape on the part of the bridegroom.

Thus Lady Eleanor's little scheme was entirely frustrated and turned against herself, and she began to think seriously that she had better let David and Elsie alone for the future, and that, after all, it was very wrong to oppose the decrees of providence. She therefore followed her natural inclination and was cordial, and even affectionate to Elsie, thus making the girl perfectly happy for the time.

Elsie had never before spent a Christmas Eve so pleasantly, nor amid so much laughter, for the young people rehearsed the tableaux which they proposed to have the next week for the entertainment of the neighbourhood, to their own intense amusement. Mr. Fitzgerald, however, would not let them sit up after twelve o'clock struck, so they all gathered at the front door, to hear the village bells proclaiming that it was Christmas morning, and then went to their rooms.

Elsie stirred her fire, and sat down to think, for she did not feel sleepy. The house grew very quiet, the flame died away, and the noise of the ashes falling into the grate at last roused her, and made her think it was high time to go to bed. She opened the window first for a moment to look out, and listen if she could still hear the chimes. No !

they had stopped, but a strange sound, strange at least at that time of night, made her heart beat quickly. It was as if a heavy carriage were coming rapidly up the drive—coming nearer and nearer, with a distinct crunching sound upon the gravel. As the sound came close under her window, Elsie involuntarily drew in her head and started back, overcome with a strange terror; then in a moment she heard the carriage stop before the door. She waited, expecting to hear a bell, but there was no sound, nor any stir in the house, and in a minute or two she took courage to look out again into the bright moonlight. By stretching her head far out, she could just see the open space in front of the door, but the black shadow cast by the porch lay upon it, and she could distinguish nothing.

‘Very strange!’ she said to herself, ‘I certainly heard it stop,’ then, as she stood musing, a sudden thought darted into her mind, a remembrance of a story Aunt Grizel had told her, how there was a superstition that before a Lindsay died, a ghostly carriage was heard at midnight, by some one connected with the family. The very terror of this thought gave Elsie energy. ‘It must be a real carriage,’ she said, ‘I must see it,’ and snatching up a light, she dashed down the stairs to the front door. It was locked and barred, and rather than waste time in undoing the fastenings, she hurried into the smoking-room, which was on the ground-floor, and one of the windows looked out upon the entrance. She went behind the curtain, undid the shutter hastily, and flung it open; but everything was still and quiet, and a light covering of new-fallen snow lay on the gravel, which was unmarked by wheel or hoof-print.

Elsie staggered back into the room, where she had left her candle burning on the table; a tall, dark figure had risen from an arm-chair, and was standing beside it.

She shrieked, but the next moment Lionel’s voice reassured her. ‘Elsie! Elsie, is that you? By jove, I thought you were a ghost! Has anything frightened you?’

‘Oh, Lionel!’ gasped Elsie, clinging to his arm in her terror, ‘how you startled me! Why are you not in bed?’

'I fell asleep, I suppose,' said Lionel. 'Is it late? how beastly cold it is! but you—you are shaking all over, and your hands are like ice. What *is* the matter, Elsie?'

'I—heard rather an odd noise,' said Elsie, trying to recover herself. 'I thought it was——'

'Burglars?'

'No, a carriage coming up the avenue, but it wasn't one really.'

Elsie fancied that Lionel gave a slight start when she mentioned the carriage, but his face did not change. He went to the window and looked out; then, without a word, he carefully fastened the shutter again.

'I'll tell you what's the matter with you, Elsie,' said he, 'your nerves have completely gone to the dogs. You've been drinking too much tea, that's what plays puck with the nerves.'

He lit another candle, which he gave her, took hers, which was nearly burnt to the socket, for himself, and still holding her hand, he gravely led her upstairs, as if she had been a child. Had Elsie not seen Lionel she would scarcely have dared to go back to her room, but would have wakened Rose, or one of her sisters; but this meeting with him had driven away all ghostly terrors from her mind. She went to bed and slept, but her rest was disturbed by a curiously vivid dream, and she woke again before it was light. She had just fallen into a most refreshing slumber when it was time to get up, and therefore did not appear downstairs until most of the party had finished breakfast, and discussed the news of the day.

'I am sorry to be so late on Christmas morning, Lady Eleanor,' she said. 'Am I the very last? No, Lionel is not down.'

'Poor Lionel seems to have taken one of his bad sore throats,' said Lady Eleanor. 'I knew it was coming on some time ago; it is very odd how misfortunes always come together.'

Elsie did not like to ask what other misfortune had occurred, she felt sure that whatever it was, every one was tired of the subject by that time; so she finished her

breakfast in silence, the rest of the party being engrossed in their Christmas cards.

As they left the room, however, she lingered to ask Lady Eleanor how Lionel was.

'Oh, well, I don't think he is very bad, my dear, but it is provoking his taking these sore throats; I thought he had outgrown them. By the bye, he wanted to see you, Elsie, but you will have to get ready for church now, I think you are late as it is. You will find him sitting in my boudoir when you come home.'

Elsie missed Lionel sadly during the walk to church, which was in a village called Monk's Leighton, half-way between Alkerton and Bulcote. It was a fine old church, and its outside left nothing to be desired; within, it was fitted with old-fashioned, high, square pews, which took away from the idea of its size and grandeur. The pews, moreover, smelt damp and musty; and the congregation had to be content with very hard cushions, and very dirty old straw hassocks. All the way up the aisle they trod on gravestones, and on the church wall, inside the pew, there was a monumental slab, which recorded the virtues of generations of deceased Pophams. These were obscured, however, on the present occasion, by the garlands of holly and ivy with which the church was festooned.

The Freemans were there in force, even Mr. Freeman, his face bound up in a red silk handkerchief, had bravely ventured forth to do honour to Christmas Day.

Elsie would have enjoyed the service more had she not felt like a sheep in a pen, owing to the inconvenient number which were crowded into the high square pew. She sat next to Heathfield, who sang lustily, but very much out of tune, and insisted on sharing his hymn-book with her. Mr. Douglas Ferrars sat opposite, and seemed much embarrassed as to how to dispose of his hat; when seated, he nursed it affectionately upon his knees, and when obliged to rise, he placed it carefully on the floor, and was evidently very nervous lest somebody should kneel upon it. Had Lionel been present, he would have been tempted to do so acci-

dentally, and Elsie began to think that, after all, his absence was not an unmitigated evil.

She went to see him as soon as they reached home, and found him sitting by the fire in his mother's boudoir, which was carefully screened from draughts. It opened into Lady Eleanor's bedroom, and she looked in as Elsie entered.

'Don't let him talk much, Elsie,' she said anxiously, 'he ought to be in bed. Just feel his hand—how feverish. Lionel, dear boy, are you sure you don't feel chilly? Well, Elsie may stay and amuse you for half an hour, but pray, don't excite him, my dear.'

'Elsie,' said Lionel, 'if it would lessen your anxiety to feel my pulse, I give you leave.' Then as Lady Eleanor left the room, he went on quickly, 'No, don't let us waste time that way. How are *you* this morning, Elsie, and have you heard any more carriages?'

'Oh Lionel! was it that open window which gave you cold? I am so sorry.'

'Nonsense! lucky for me you came in, or I might have been sleeping in that arm-chair now. But tell me the whole story.'

Elsie, willing to humour him, told him all that she had thought she heard.

'And so you thought it was the Corinthian coach?'

'I could not help thinking of it, but I did not know you knew the story.'

'Of course I know the story,' said Lionel. 'Have not David and I been "deaved" with it, as our old nurse Ailie would have said, ever since we were babies in arms? but I should have thought you had more sense than to believe such rot.'

'I never thought before whether I believed it or not. Aunt Grizel said she didn't, but it always sounded very awful as she told it. If I had been "deaved" with it like you, perhaps I should have thought it nonsense too.'

'And what was your version, then?'

'Once,' said Elsie, 'there was an old Lord Corinthian who was very wicked. I don't know when he lived. Aunt Grizel

thought it was sixteen hundred and something, but she wasn't sure. He had some deadly enemies ; and one day when he was driving in his coach between Brechin and Forfar——'

'My story says King's Kettle and Falkland—but go on.'

'Two of his enemies laid wait to murder him, and each of them put in his pistol through the opposite coach-windows, and shot him dead where he sat. And then they set him bolt upright on the cushions, and told the coachman to drive home to Corinzean Castle, and not to say a word for his life. And when he got to the castle, his lady came down to the door, and when she looked into the coach, there was her husband's dead body sitting in it. And she gave one shriek, and became a *raving maniac* !'

'A gibbering idiot, my story says,' observed Lionel, 'but I see we're agreed on the main points.'

'Your story is more likely to be the correct one,' said Elsie, after thinking a minute, 'because Corinzean Castle is south of the Tay, and the coachman could not drive across the water.'

'That is a mere detail,' said Lionel, 'but proceed.'

'And since ever that awful night,' continued Elsie, unconsciously imitating her Aunt Grizel, 'a coach and four drives up to Corinzean Castle at the dead hour of the night—but it leaves no mark upon the gravel. And they say it may be seen and heard at other places, by any one who is of kin to the Lindsays—but then it goes before a death. That is the way Aunt Grizel always ended,' said Elsie, 'but it was not easy to get her to begin. And she used to say "Hoots, nonsense !" and get quite cross if I questioned her about it.'

'Be sure you say nothing to the mother about having heard a carriage,' said Lionel. 'She hates the story like poison, and it would put her in a mortal fright. She would think it was the Corinzean coach whenever any one came to call.'

'You ought not to talk, Lionel,' said Elsie. 'Is your throat very sore ?'

'Rather. I shan't be able to go to old Ardvoira's funeral, which is a blessing.'

'I did not know he was dead,' said Elsie, startled.

'What, didn't you hear? the news came this morning. I ought to congratulate you, for of course Ardvoira is David's now.'

'Ah, don't!' said Elsie, shuddering. 'Lionel, perhaps that noise might have meant him.'

'Much more likely it meant me,' replied Lionel cheerfully. 'He was not a Lindsay, but a Macdonald; besides he must have been dead some time before you heard it.'

'Do you know the Corinzean people, Lionel? Are any of them likely to die?'

'I hope they will,' replied Lionel, 'on David's account, but I fear they won't. His present lordship is subject to d. t.'s, I believe, and his son, the Master, takes epileptic fits. The Corinzeans have always drunk like fishes; it is to be hoped David won't take to it, but I think it only right to mention——'

'Now, Lionel, you have talked quite enough. I am going.'

'No, I haven't—don't go. The mother will come back—never fear, and turn you out. Tell me some more ghost stories, I am just in the humour,' and Lionel laid himself back comfortably, and arranged a pillow under his head.

'I don't know any more,' said Elsie, 'but I will tell you an odd dream I had last night; generally one forgets dreams, but I remember this one distinctly. I was at Rossie, lying in a bed there, but somehow it did not seem to be my own room; and I saw Euphemia and Marjorie sitting over a fire, whispering together and crying—but I could not hear what they said. And suddenly a carriage drove up to the door, and a bell rang—twice. And they were frightened, and I awoke. Then I went to sleep again, and dreamt the same thing: that I was at Rossie, and somebody sat in the room crying, but this time it was your mother. And she cried bitterly, and wrung her hands, and I wanted to get to her and comfort her, but I could not, because there was something between. And then some-

how I was out of doors, and although it was dark I could see everything perfectly well; the Michaelmas daisies were in flower—it must have been autumn—and they reminded me that I was dead. And I felt so light and happy, and said, “How foolish to be troubled about anything, because of course I am dead.”

‘Why should Michaelmas daisies remind you that you are dead?’ inquired Lionel, not unnaturally.

‘I don’t know,’ said Elsie, ‘except that they always do remind me of graves; they grow in the churchyard at St. Ethernans. It was an odd dream, was it not?’

‘I see nothing odd about it,’ said Lionel discontentedly; ‘a common domestic nightmare. It was the natural consequence of rushing about the house in that idiotic way—you must have eaten something which disagreed with you.’

‘Here comes your mother,’ said Elsie. ‘She will scold me for letting you talk.’

‘Lionel, dear,’ said Lady Eleanor, ‘what could you take for luncheon—a little soup? Do go to bed at once to please me—you are quite feverish. Have you been talking?’

Lady Eleanor was always a good deal perplexed in cases of illness; she did not know what to do, and felt aggrieved, as though the patient had done it on purpose to annoy her. But her mind was at present full of medical ideas, as she had just come from a discussion upon Mr. Macdonald’s death, which, she assured her husband, was entirely brought about by his own carelessness. Had he only used common prudence, there was nothing to prevent him living until David came home from India, which would have been so much more convenient for every one.

Lionel declared he had scarcely uttered a word. ‘Elsie has been telling me stories,’ he said. ‘She has had nightmare from eating too many mince-pies.’

‘Dear me, Elsie, I wish you would not,’ said Lady Eleanor, turning to her reproachfully. ‘I really can *not* have another person ill in the house. Mince-pies! how dreadfully unwholesome? How many did you eat, child?’

‘I am quite well, Lady Eleanor,’ said Elsie, ‘don’t

believe Lionel. And I don't like mince-pies, though I did eat one last night, for luck.'

'I don't see much luck,' said Lady Eleanor, 'pray don't do it again. I do dislike vulgar superstition. Two misfortunes have happened already, for I can't take you girls to those dances next week; I shall be in mourning; and now I have no doubt there will be a third, they always come in threes. I am quite prepared for it.'

The calamity which Lady Eleanor foresaw was not long in coming. The party went down in the afternoon of the following day to the village school, to assist at a Christmas tree, which was lighted up for the benefit of the children on the estate. The presents had been given, and Elsie was busy distributing little bags of sweets, which were cut down for her by Heathfield, when she was aware of a sort of hubbub in the room, a feeling in the air, which warned her that something unusual had occurred. She looked round—Rosamond had disappeared, so had Constance, and Blanche seemed in the act of following them.

'Where is Constance gone?' she asked Heathfield.

'She was called out a minute or two ago,' was the answer. 'Some one said Rosamond wanted her.'

'Let us make haste and finish,' said Elsie. 'I am afraid somebody is ill.'

'Perhaps faint,' suggested Heathfield. 'I hope you do not feel so. The heat of this room must be very overpowering to a lady.'

'I am not faint,' said Elsie, 'but I am sure something is wrong. Please be quick, Lord Heathfield—never mind that wire.'

But Heathfield conscientiously insisted upon stripping the tree completely, and not defrauding a single child of the smallest nut or raisin, before he suffered Elsie to depart. As they approached the house, they saw Douglas Ferrars and Mr. Fitzgerald talking earnestly; presently the latter went in, and Mr. Ferrars came forward to meet them.

Heathfield at once inquired whether anything unusual had taken place, and Mr. Ferrars replied in a highly indignant tone of voice: 'Why, yes, something rather singular,

I must say. Lady Seathwaite's husband has disappeared ; they have actually sent a servant here to look for him.'

'What?' exclaimed Elsie.

'Yes, you are surprised,' continued Mr. Ferrars; 'so was I. Naturally I was surprised; but the family ought surely to have known of Sir Roger's state. He has escaped from his—from whoever had the charge of him; nobody knows where he is; Lady Seathwaite is going home to-morrow morning, and I hear she actually proposed—either she or Lady Eleanor—that Constance should go with her!'

'Poor Rosamond, how distressing!' said Heathfield. 'Constance would naturally wish to be with her sister at such a crisis, but it is hard upon you, Ferrars.'

The indignant Mr. Ferrars began to launch forth into some rather uncomplimentary remarks about Lady Seathwaite, which Heathfield checked in his quiet way, reminding him that Miss Ross was present, but when he looked round Elsie had vanished.

She hurried in as soon as she heard that Rose was to leave Alkerton the next morning, and went to look for her. Guided by the sound of voices, she went into the parlour just as Lady Eleanor was leaving it, and Elsie heard her say as she did so, 'Well, do as you please, Rose, but I don't think you ought to go alone.'

Rosamond had risen, and was standing with one foot on the fender; Constance and Blanche were sitting on either side of the hearth, looking at her and at each other in a doubtful, uncomfortable sort of way. None of the three took any notice of Elsie, as she drew near and regarded the little group with troubled eyes.

'Well,' said Rosamond at length, in rather a hard little voice, 'family councils are rather a waste of time, are not they? I must go and speak to Thérèse.'

She put her hand lightly on Elsie's shoulder as she passed her. 'Come and help me to pack,' she said. 'You know I am off to-morrow morning, don't you, Elsie?'

'I only heard it this moment,' said Elsie. 'Are you going, Blanche? or Constance?'

'I cannot go—very well,' said Constance, 'but I should think Blanche might. Stay a moment, Rose, where is your hurry about packing?'

'Well,' said Blanche, 'you know how particular mamma is, and that I am a great deal younger than you—but if you think it would not be considered *odd*——'

'We have discussed all that before,' said Rose. 'I can go alone perfectly well,' and she left the room quickly. Elsie was about to follow her, but stopped a moment to say to Constance, 'Does Thérèse not go with her?'

'No,' replied Constance, 'she is going to leave Mona here, with Thérèse to look after her. But I must say, Blanche, I think it is rather selfish of you——'

'Selfish!' retorted Blanche, 'of course I would go if there was any necessity; but I am not going to do your work just to please Douglas Ferrars. What do you think, Elsie?'

'I think,' said Elsie rather timidly, 'that if neither of you can go, perhaps I might.'

'Oh!' said Constance, 'it is very kind of you, Elsie, but you would not like it, and——'

'Yes, I would,' said Elsie. 'I should like it very much, if Rose did not think me in the way.'

'In the way—oh no!' cried both sisters; 'but you have no idea what a horrid journey it is, and what a cold house——'

'I will go and see if Rose will take me,' said Elsie eagerly, and ran upstairs.

Elsie had some little difficulty at first in persuading Rosamond to let her go with her to Seathwaite; she felt somewhat shy of making the proposal, for much as she wished to be of use to her friend, she was afraid of seeming forward or officious. Rosamond declared she needed no one, and was quite able to take care of herself; but the moment Elsie detected by her manner that she was really a little hurt at her sisters' selfishness, and that she had fully intended to take one of them with her, she became very firm, and declared that it was now quite settled, and she must go and pack her clothes.

‘But your aunt, my child. Won’t she think me a demon?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Elsie. ‘I don’t think Aunt Caroline’s opinion need prevent my going.’

‘And Aunt Eleanor? have you asked her leave?’

‘No, but I will go and ask her now, and I can pack whilst she makes up her mind.’

Elsie was as good as her word, and the making up of Lady Eleanor’s mind was indeed a work of time. She had been half persuaded already by Constance and Blanche that it would be an excellent thing for Elsie to go with their sister, but, on the other hand, she had the fear of Aunt Caroline and also of Lionel before her eyes. Lionel’s objections to the plan were very strong and decided, but as he was now in bed, and only able to speak with difficulty, they were overruled; and as Elsie was anxious to go and Rosamond to take her, his proposal of detaining her by force was not attended to.

CHAPTER V.

'Uncover ye his face, she said.
O changed in little space !
She said, O pale that was so red !
O God ! O God of grace !
Cover his face.'

THE travellers made an early start, and by ten o'clock were fairly on their way. There was an inch or two of snow on the ground when they left Alkerton ; and Elsie expected to find deeper snow on the bleak Yorkshire moors, of which she had read descriptions ; but, on the contrary, as they went farther north the weather appeared milder, only a mournful whistling wind arose, and heavy drops of rain mixed with sleet dashed against the carriage windows, and shut out any view there might have been.

Rosamond was silent and abstracted ; she had scarcely spoken since the beginning of the journey ; and Elsie's spirits, which had been high when she started, fell in sympathy with her companion's mood, until, as the short daylight waned, she became quite miserable, and began to torment herself with all kinds of fears. She wished she knew what Rosamond was thinking of ; what made her look so pale and strange ? Was she thinking of Mona ? perhaps that was it, and Elsie's thoughts went back to the nursery at Alkerton. She wished she knew how Lionel was ; perhaps he was going to be very ill ; perhaps he would die, and she had disregarded his last wishes by coming to Seathwaite. Above all, she wished she could hear from David ; and for the first time an alarm for David's safety possessed her. The Corinthian coach ! the vision of Christmas Eve

flashed into her mind with a new and terrible meaning ; Elsie turned faint and sick at the sudden foolish panic, and instinctively put out her hands to clutch something. Rosamond did not notice the gesture in the gathering dusk, and they were approaching their journey's end.

When they reached the station at Seathwaite, a respectable elderly man-servant opened the carriage door, and helped down his mistress and her belongings in grave silence.

'Are there any news?' she demanded of him abruptly.

'No news, my lady,' he answered, and looked doubtfully at Elsie. He helped her also to descend, and looked round the carriage to see if they had left anything behind. Finding a crumpled-up newspaper, which Elsie had dropped, he straightened it out and presented it to her with extreme gravity, and, as she fancied, a look of melancholy reproach.

The park gates were just outside the village, and they drove up a long avenue, winding amongst clumps of firs, to a large gloomy-looking stone house with a pillared portico. The body of the house was probably about a hundred years old, but on each side of the entrance was a huge new-built wing, of depressing regularity of outline. Rosamond led the way through the entrance-hall, which was lined with stuffed birds and beasts and huge elks horns, through a billiard-room and a large library to a smaller sitting-room, where a bright fire was burning, and tea was laid out on a low table. Here she left Elsie, and returned to the outer room to speak to Atkinson, the man who had met them at the station, and who was Sir Roger's confidential servant, and had taken the lead in the search which had been set on foot. She remained a considerable time away, and in the interval Elsie looked round her. The room she sat in was well-furnished, and Rosamond's taste showed itself in its arrangement ; and yet to Elsie's eye it had a somewhat dreary look, with its high ceiling and rather gaunt walls. The whole place looked inexpressibly dull and melancholy. 'No wonder,' thought the girl, 'that Rosamond hates it. I do not think that any furniture, or even any people, would

make it cheerful. Poor Rosamond ! I wish she would come ; what can be the matter ?’

She waited some time longer, and then Rosamond came in with a weary step, and sat her down before the fire, apparently forgetful of Elsie’s presence. After a minute Elsie spoke to her, asking her if she would not take off her heavy furs, and Rosamond answered gently, ‘Yes, dear, yes,’ but without seeming to take in what was said. After a while she rose with a sigh, and hastily taking off her coat she flung it on a chair, and turned to the table, saying, ‘Well, I suppose we must have some food.’

‘Atkinson has nothing new to tell me,’ she said by and by. ‘Everything has been done, it seems, which can be done. They have searched all round the place ; he has been telling me about it——’ and she shivered slightly. ‘He is going to-morrow to Linton to make inquiries ; nothing more can be done to-night.’

There was no need to dwell upon the subject of Sir Roger’s disappearance, and they both tried to dismiss it and talk of other things, but without much success, and for the most part they kept silence. At Rosamond’s request Elsie shared her room with her at night ; each lay quiet for fear of disturbing the other, but neither slept much, and the next day Rosamond confessed to feeling tired.

‘But I have a great many things to see to,’ she said, ‘and you, dear child, look pale. Go out and take a walk ; the fresh air will do you good ; and take Cæsar, the big mastiff, with you, he is as sensible as a man.’

Elsie obeyed, and fearlessly unchained the great dog, who at once took her under his protection, and walked by her side with a condescending air, usurping most of the footpath, and insisting on carrying her umbrella in his mouth, dropping it from time to time, but pushing her away whenever she tried to pick it up again. Having explored the garden, Elsie instinctively took her way towards the open fields ; she rather disliked the look of the village, but as Cæsar seemed to think it the right place to go, she yielded to his solicitations for the sake of peace, and walked down

the avenue in that direction. She had nearly reached the gate when she met a female figure in a brown ulster, carrying a basket, at the sight of whom Cæsar bristled all over with indignation, and the woman, or lady, for so it was, uttered an exclamation and sprang towards her.

'The dog is quite gentle,' said Elsie, thinking she was frightened. 'Cæsar, come here, sir!'

'I beg your pardon!' said the stranger volubly; 'I thought, when I saw the dog, that you were Lady Seathwaite. Are you staying with her? I have *just* heard she had returned, and was coming to see if I could be useful, or if she would like to see Mr. Maddon. I am Mrs. Maddon,' she added.

'Thank you very much,' said Elsie, who had already guessed that this zealous little woman, with her charitable-looking basket, was the clergyman's wife. 'Lady Seathwaite only came back last night—she is pretty well. She is—a good deal occupied this morning; but I will give her your kind message.'

Elsie blushed as she said this, not liking to be ungracious, but anxious at any cost to save Rosamond from a troublesome visitor. Mrs. Maddon did seem a little hurt.

'If you think Lady Seathwaite will not see me this morning, I had better spare myself the walk. My time is precious; I must go and see a sick man. *Good-bye*—or were you going to the village?'

'I was only taking a walk,' said Elsie; 'we might go to the gate together.'

'Poor Lady Seathwaite!' said Mrs. Maddon, as they walked on. 'I *do* feel for her. Has *nothing* been heard of Sir Roger?'

'No,' said Elsie, 'nothing.'

'Ah!' said Mrs. Maddon, with a sympathetic gasp. 'And—excuse me—*does* she realise it?'

'Realise what?' asked Elsie.

'That he has made away with himself,' replied Mrs. Maddon, lowering her voice. 'Ah! I fear there cannot be a doubt about it. Day and night I see him before me—'

his lifeless body. So does Mr. Maddon ; he anticipates the very worst.'

As she spoke Mrs. Maddon cast up her eyes apprehensively to the church steeple, as if she expected to see the lost baronet dangling from it. By this time they had reached the gate, which Elsie unfastened.

'I must go back now,' she said, 'good-bye.'

'And you will be *sure* to send for me if I can be of the least use,' said Mrs. Maddon, wringing her hand hard and looking into her face with eager, earnest eyes. 'She ought *not* to be alone ; if her parents do not come to her——'

'They would come at once,' said Elsie, 'if anything happened ; and she is not quite alone, you know, while I am here.'

But Mrs. Maddon only shook her head a little, breathed another '*good-bye*,' and scuttled off with her basket.

Elsie walked home thoughtfully, musing on what Mrs. Maddon had said. It was possible, of course, that Sir Roger had committed suicide, indeed Elsie knew that that was what his wife dreaded ; but to have the doubt put into words made it seem more real ; she was more than ever glad that she had not admitted the visitor.

* 'She is a maddening woman,' observed Rosamond, when Elsie told her of her adventure. 'She is well-named. You did quite right to turn her ; not that I would have seen her if she had come.'

'She meant kindly,' said Elsie.

'Don't talk of her !' said Rosamond impatiently, adding, after a minute, 'Elsie, I have had a telegram whilst you were out—at least Atkinson has. They think they have found—traces.'

'Where ?'

'A porter at Bramley station declares he has seen him—at least some one answering to the description. Atkinson is to start by the next train, in half an hour's time, so we ought to hear something before night.'

All that afternoon the rain came down in torrents, and Rosamond, though she walked restlessly about the room and often went to the window, did not propose to go out.

In the evening the wind increased to a gale, which continued all night long; it howled and moaned round the house, making the windows rattle, and disturbing the sleepers in their beds. No message came that night, and in the morning there was merely an unsatisfactory one from Atkinson, to say he was doing his best to follow up the tracks which had been found.

Rosamond looked more pale and hollow-eyed, and Elsie began to be really anxious about her; she seemed so strange and restless. She was very gentle and affectionate to Elsie, but the girl could see that she had a constant desire to get rid of her and wander in the woods alone. It was one of those dark, gray days in mid-winter, when the air feels dead and the clouds hang low, as if too heavy to bear their own weight. There was no rain nor snow, only a moaning wind, the remains of the late gale, which sounded dismally from the fir woods, and seemed to Elsie's excited ears to be bringing something with it, some new trouble—some strange unknown terror.

She would not let Rosamond go out alone in the afternoon, but clung to her persistently, in spite of her friend's evident desire to wander by herself.

'Shall we take Cæsar?' said Rosamond, as she shut the hall door.

Elsie perceived a dissuasive inflection in her voice, and answered 'N—no, Rose, I don't think we need; he was out this morning.'

'He gets so bored in the woods,' said Rosamond, relieved. 'He likes best to go to the station and see the trains come in; and though he is fond of me, I think he prefers the station-master.'

It struck Elsie as strange that Rosamond should be so evidently relieved at not having to take Cæsar, nor could she understand why her friend always tried to keep a little in front of her as she walked rapidly through the wood, stopping sometimes to walk round some tree, and then again hurrying forward. By and by they came to a pool of water at the farther edge of the wood; a dark, black-looking pool, with a steep bank at one side. Here Rosa-

mond stopped Elsie with a quick, imperative sign. 'Stay you there,' she said; and mounting the bank she looked down eagerly into the water. Elsie now saw how she expected, yet feared, to find her husband's body; and a great horror and pity took possession of her. She sprang up the bank, and with her arm round her friend, looked down too into the dark water; but there was nothing.

'Come home with me, my dear, come home,' she said. 'There is nothing here.'

Rosamond submitted in silence, and Elsie led her home, not letting go her hand till they reached the house. All that evening they sat together, listening to the ceaseless moaning of the wind, waiting and expecting—what? Elsie dared not think, she could only do what seemed best at the present moment. These days passed like years; it seemed almost as if it were unlikely that the sun would ever shine again, or anything happen to break the terrible silence. She thought of David as of a far-off dream; even Alkerton, which she had left so lately, was indistinct to her, like a place she had lived in many many years ago, when she was young and free from care.

That night passed like the two former, except that they both slept more, from sheer exhaustion. In the morning Rosamond seemed so weary that Elsie persuaded her to stay in bed, and brought her some breakfast herself. After this she went downstairs and exerted herself to write a long letter to David. She had nearly finished when she heard a stir, and a ring at the bell; then the butler came in to say that Mr. Maddon had called, and was waiting to see Lady Scathwaite. The man spoke in a peculiarly grave subdued tone, and Elsie looked at him questioningly.

'Mr. Maddon—that is the clergyman? Has he come—why has he come?'

'I could not say, miss,' said the man uneasily. 'Mr. Maddon is a very silent gentleman; but he says he must see her ladyship.'

Elsie thought a minute, then went upstairs to Rosamond, whom she found nearly dressed.

'Rosamond, Mr. Madden has come, and is asking for

you. Shall I see him? or would you rather speak to him yourself?’

‘I expected this,’ said Rosamond calmly. ‘Tell them to show Mr. Maddon into the library, Elsie; I will see him alone.’

Sir Roger Seathwaite had been found dead early that morning by some labourers; drowned in an old quarry four or five miles from the house. The place had been searched before, when he first disappeared; it was evident that he must have wandered away and returned, and it was impossible to say whether his death had or had not been intentional. He appeared to have fallen over a rock into the quarry, and might have missed his footing in the dark; on the other hand, there were no marks to show that he had fallen over the edge, and tried to save himself. It was certain, from the evidence of Atkinson, who returned from his unsuccessful search soon afterwards, that for some time previous Sir Roger had been completely insane. The coroner’s inquest, which was held later, returned a verdict of accidental death.

Lady Seathwaite received the news of her husband’s fate with perfect composure, displaying neither grief nor surprise. She listened to all that Mr. Maddon had to say, and after he left she went to Elsie, and quietly told her the particulars. When Elsie proposed to send for her parents, she assented, though indifferently, adding with a sort of relief, ‘This is Saturday, they cannot be here until Monday.’

When her husband’s dead body was being brought in, and Elsie would fain have kept the knowledge from her, she knew perfectly what the heavy footsteps meant, and waited calmly till they ceased. Then she left the room, forbidding her friend to follow her, and passing through the awe-struck group of servants, she stood and looked at the dead face, which was less repulsive in death than she had often seen it in life, when it had been swollen and purple with drink, or distorted with passion.

‘It looks at least like the remains of a man, and not like a wild beast.’ So Rosamond thought as she gazed

upon it ; then making a sign to Atkinson to cover it up, she walked away.

Elsie met her at the door. Rosamond was so reasonable that her friend felt she had a right to have her wishes attended to, but Elsie could not but feel anxious about her ; this extreme calmness and reserve seemed so unnatural. It did not give way until the next day, when Mr. Maddon called again after service, and inquired if the widow would see him.

‘Tell Mr. Maddon I cannot see him,’ she said peremptorily, when the message was brought her.

‘Do you not think it might be better to see him?’ asked Elsie wistfully.

‘I will not,’ cried Rosamond with flashing eyes. ‘The man is a fool,’ she went on, breaking into angry tears. ‘He told me yesterday to take comfort—why, do you think? because Roger had perhaps found mercy at the last moment, and had gone to heaven. *He* gone to heaven, poor wretch! what would he do in heaven? he would be miserable,’ and she laughed hysterically.

‘Don’t be shocked at me, Elsie ; God will have mercy on my poor Roger, for I don’t think that he could help it. I don’t believe in hell—not in Mr. Maddon’s kind of hell—I don’t think any one is bad enough for that ; but poor Roger in heaven—no ! And I don’t want to be consoled with,’ she went on. ‘I may be a wicked woman, Elsie, but I am not a hypocrite. I am not sorry he is dead—how can I be? But oh ! I am thankful it was not I who found him.’

Elsie cried with her for a while ; it was a relief to her, and she was glad to see Rosamond’s tears. She thought it best to encourage her to say what was in her mind.

‘You thought you knew where he was, then?’ she said.

‘I felt as if I must look for him,’ replied Rosamond. ‘I did not want to find him—I was dreadfully afraid of finding him, but it was my duty, I suppose ; it was what I came home for. Do you remember advising me not to take Cæsar? well, I was pleased at that, for I thought Cæsar would be sure to find him, and you would have to

see'—she stopped shuddering. 'One did not know how—but that is over. Child! do not you get ill; that is all I ask.'

As evening came on Elsie soothed her as best she could, and tried to prevent her getting excited, fearing she would not sleep. She felt the responsibility a good deal, as Rosamond laughed at the idea of seeing the doctor, and positively refused to have any one near her but Elsie; but once Rosamond had begun to talk, she would not be kept quiet, and poured out to her friend the whole sad history of her married life.

'But you liked him at first?' Elsie asked her. 'He was not so bad at first, surely?'

'Liked him! no, I never liked him,' said Rosamond. 'And he was just as bad at first, except that he was sane enough, and did not want to kill himself or me.'

'But if you did not like him, I don't understand——'
Elsie stopped.

'Why I married him? neither do I now. But I was very young and very silly, and I cared for somebody else—but he had never written, and they persuaded me he wanted to get rid of me. It was a lie of course. But I was quite in despair and did not care what became of me, and I married Roger just because I was bothered into it.'

'Poor Rose!' said Elsie. 'And was he cruel to you?'

'Oh, he was kind in his way—sometimes, and at other times he was quite, quite mad.'

'And did he threaten your life?'

'Yes, and then he had to be shut up. I did not mind for myself, only for Mona; I could generally keep him in order unless he was very bad. But I am very, *very* thankful he is dead!'

So was Elsie, and she devoutly echoed the thanksgiving, at the same time inwardly hoping that Rose would not express this sentiment in public, though from her experience of her friend she thought it was extremely likely that she would.

CHAPTER VI.

*'Cap. . . . Well, Wednesday is too soon,
O' Thursday let it be ;—o' Thursday, tell her
She shall be married to this noble earl :—
We'll keep no great ado : -a friend, or two :—
For hark you, Tybalt being slain so late,
It may be thought we held him carelessly,
Being our kinsman, if we revel much . . .
But what say you to 'Thursday?'*

ELSIE looked forward hopefully to the arrival of Rosamond's parents, thinking that a mother would of course know what to do, and supply all her lack of experience. They arrived on the Monday evening, and Elsie turned away from Rosamond's first meeting with her mother, to speak to Sir Richard Mortimer, who was a fine-looking elderly man, with a pompous, dictatorial manner. He was polite to Elsie, and said that his daughter was under very great obligations to her; but he fretted and fumed with indignation over the whole business, and found fault with the way in which everything had been managed.

Poor Lady Mary clasped her daughter in her arms and cried, and would not leave off until she was peremptorily ordered by her husband to do so: she had had a long journey, and seemed tired and upset. She was something like Lady Eleanor in appearance, but was much older looking; there was really ten years' difference in their ages, and Lady Mary had a careworn look which made her seem older still. She was thin, too, and shrunken, and had had none of her sister's stately grace of outline, and her complexion, instead of being the rich creamy tint of Lady Eleanor's, had become sallow and unhealthy;

but she carried herself well, and had a certain air of distinction.

Rosamond made an effort to bear her mother's lamentations patiently, pitied her fatigue, and begged Elsie to see that she was made comfortable; and Elsie found her cares increased rather than lessened by the arrival of these relatives. Lady Mary appealed to her in everything, and was utterly helpless with Rosamond. The only good she did was to arrange about her daughter's mourning, and that of the household; and this was not accomplished without a great deal of unnecessary bustle, Rosamond being dragged into every consultation, and even called upon to settle what material should be used for the maids' caps.

The subject which next came uppermost in Lady Mary's mind was whether her daughter Constance's marriage should be put off, and for how long.

'Sir Richard docs not see why it should be put off,' she said to Elsie, 'and Constance will not say one thing or another. It was fixed for the 20th, and I think a quiet wedding then—but Blanche says it would be disgraceful to have it before June. I do think Easter would be quite long enough for them to wait, but if Rose has any feeling—do you think she has, Miss Ross?'

'I don't think so, Lady Mary,' said Elsie. 'Indeed, I am sure she has not.'

'You see, it is most inconvenient,' said Lady Mary. 'Everything fixed and settled. The cake is ordered—that will keep, of course. And the flowers were ordered—bouquets of forced lily of the valley,—a charming idea, was it not? and really at Easter one does not know what flowers they could have.'

Elsie tried to think, but in vain.

'I can think of nothing but arum lilies,' said Lady Mary despairingly, 'and they could not carry them in their hands. They would be pretty to decorate the church though,' she added, struck with a bright thought, 'very pretty and appropriate. Azaleas? not very pretty. Maréchal Niel roses? she had set her heart upon white.'

'Narcissus?' suggested Elsie. 'Pheasant's eye?'

'They have a dreadfully strong smell,' said Lady Mary despondingly, 'but a good idea; thank you, Miss Ross. I really do *not* know that one could have it before Easter.'

Rosamond entered as the last words were said.

'Have what, mamma?' she asked languidly. 'Oh, Constance's marriage, I suppose. When was it to be?'

'Oh, Rose, my dear, no one would ever dream of it if you have the least feeling about it; indeed I think it must be put off. The 20th would never do—I really do not know *when* to have it.'

Rosamond walked to the window, lifted up a corner of the blind and looked out; then she came back to her mother.

'Well, mamma, if you ask my advice, I should say put it off until Easter, for decency's sake; after that, have it by all means; I have no feelings in the matter. I merely say this because you are fond of doing the correct thing—as far as I am concerned you might have it to-morrow.'

'Well, well, my dear,' said Lady Mary fretfully, 'I only want to spare you as much as possible. I hope you have been lying down. Miss Ross, pray persuade her to lie down—she will need all her strength for to-morrow.'

Several of the relations came that evening to attend the funeral on the morrow; among whom was the new baronet, Sir George Scathwaite, Roger's cousin. Mr. Fitzgerald was another of the guests; and the sight of him brought Elsie back to everyday life more than anything which had happened since she came to Scathwaite. He said that Lionel was better and able to leave his room, which Elsie was very glad to hear.

The funeral was over at last, and the legal proceedings satisfactorily concluded. The lawyer believed Sir Roger Scathwaite to have left no will; but by the marriage settlements the widow was amply provided for, and Mona inherited a considerable fortune, though the title and estates passed to a cousin. The reading of the documents was soon over, and the guests were about to disperse. Elsie heard Sir Richard bidding them good-bye in a loud cheerful tone, and presently they came in to make their adieux

to Lady Mary. Elsie could not help smiling at the expression of Sir George's face; he was a merry little man with a natural tendency to whistle and hum tunes from sheer exuberance of spirits, and had with difficulty composed himself to a decent solemnity during the late melancholy ceremony. Now he was like a boy just let loose from school, and Elsie looked at him, half expecting to see him turn a somersault out at the door, when the lawyer entered hastily, saying, 'Gentlemen, I must beg your attention for a few moments longer. A will has been found.'

Sir George's face lengthened considerably, and they all returned in a saddened manner to the library, where a very long discussion was held, after which most of the guests took their departure; but Sir George and the lawyer, having missed their train, were obliged to remain at Seathwaite till the next day. By and by Sir Richard was heard storming and stamping about the house. 'Rosamond! where is Rosamond?' cried he, entering the room where the ladies were sitting.

'Dear Richard, she has only just gone to rest,' said Lady Mary. 'Pray do not disturb the poor child.'

'Rest! what the devil——? is she ill then?' cried Sir Richard. 'Tell her I must see her at once. She can prove it's all nonsense. The man was mad—as mad as a March hare.'

Elsie went to fetch Rosamond, whose quick ears had already heard her name called many times, but who was determined not to stir till she was sent for.

'Some new calamity, I suppose,' she said, when Elsie had repeated Sir Richard's message. 'Well, Elsie, you must leave me to fight it out, you can't help me, dear. Go out and take a walk; that will do you more good than anything.'

Elsie went reluctantly, but she knew she was best out of the way, and she compelled herself to walk twice to the park gate and back again, which would occupy a whole hour; yet when she came in the sound of voices told her that the discussion, whatever it was, was still going on. She feared Rosamond would be quite worn out, but

that evening her friend insisted on telling her the whole story.

'My dear,' she said, 'you may be glad I sent you out. No sooner were you gone than papa came storming and raging, and saying I must prove this, that, and the other. I had to go to the library with him and George and Mr. Hunter, who had found the will stuck behind a drawer which had been searched before, and they read it to me. He threatened me once that he would make a will like that, but I did not believe that he really would or could, and I defied him to do it; but it seems to be all correct and formal.'

'And what was it?' asked Elsie anxiously. 'I thought it was not in his power to do you any real harm.'

'Well, no, but he did his best. He hated his cousin George too, but he could not prevent his getting the title or the lands; however, he has burdened the estate with ever so many useless legacies; one, amongst others, to build public-houses in all the neighbouring parishes. This is to annoy George, because he is a great temperance man.'

'And is that all?' asked Elsie.

'Oh, there is a provision that I—if I marry again before Mona is of age—I am not to see her or have any intercourse with her. If she lives with me, she forfeits her fortune.'

'No wonder Sir Richard was angry,' said Elsie indignantly.

'Yes, he was in a fearful frame of mind about it. Poor George tried to keep him quiet, he thought I would be hurt; though the public-houses must have come rather hard upon him.'

'But they are going to dispute it, are not they? it will not stand?'

'No, I think they will be able to dispose of it on the ground of insanity; though—mind you—I don't think Roger was mad at the moment he made it—it was so like him. Papa cannot stand my saying that before those other two; *that* made him very angry. I knew it would.'

Elsie could not help sharing Sir Richard's opinion that it would have been better left unsaid ; there was a vindictiveness in Rosamond's disposition which she was unable to enter into. She looked very grave and troubled over the affair of the will, and took an opportunity of asking Lady Mary whether she thought it could possibly hold good. The latter answered that the three gentlemen were unanimous in thinking that it could be proved invalid, but that this might involve some tedious law business, especially as one of the trustees seemed disposed to be troublesome.

When a few more days had passed the Mortimers returned to Wynchcombe, taking Rosamond with them. All joined in cordially inviting Elsie to accompany them ; and she was much tempted to do so, as she had grown to cling greatly to Rose, and dreaded the idea of parting with her. It was hard to resist her friends' entreaties, but Elsie considered that Rosamond had no real need of her now, as she was going back to her sisters and to Mona ; and she thought it was high time to return to Aunt Caroline, whose letters showed that she was very much hurt and offended with her niece for going to Seathwaite at all. Elsie therefore parted from her friends at Paddington Station, for they all went up to London together ; and about the middle of January found herself once more at Chippingham.

CHAPTER VII.

'We looked for peace, but no good came; and for a time of health,
and behold trouble!'

MRS. LINDSAY found it difficult to forgive the offence of which her niece had been guilty by her bold and independent conduct. Such a spirit she considered extremely unbecoming in a young female; and when Elsie returned to her pale and languid, worn out in mind and body by all that she had gone through, Mrs. Lindsay lost no opportunity of impressing upon her that such were the invariable but bitter fruits of disobedience. She would hear nothing of Rosamond and her trials, with the recital of which Elsie tried to soften her; Lady Seathwaite was one of those whose existence she utterly and entirely disapproved of. As to the late baronet, she considered it highly improper that a young unmarried woman should even be aware that such a person had ever existed; therefore lectures and exhortations were now the order of the day.

As Elsie drooped, however, from day to day, cried when her aunt scolded her, and had no appetite, Mrs. Lindsay began to see that her niece was far from well. The doctor and Parkins were called in to prescribe; tonics and kind treatment were next administered; and as the spring flowers came out and the days grew longer, the girl began to revive a little.

David's letters could not but cheer her, they were so full of joyful expectation. He reminded her that the two years' probation was drawing to a close; he had no doubt of being able to come home in autumn on special leave; and, lest Elsie should interpose any delays, he took the precau-

tion of writing to Aunt Caroline, urging her to make preparations for the marriage, which was to take place in October. Mrs. Lindsay undertook this task with the greatest zeal, and Elsie's wishes in the matter were entirely overruled. The Laird seemed to take it as a matter of course that his daughter's marriage should take place at Rossie, and Elsie herself had no other thought; but Mrs. Lindsay eagerly pointed out to her how impossible this was. The General, who was now very feeble in health, would be quite unequal to the long journey; she herself would be greatly tried by it; so would Miss Maynard; while it was evident that the wild and inhospitable region in which Rossie was situated would afford no suitable accommodation for David's parents. Elsie's wishes should be consulted in all reasonable matters; her father must of course be present to give her away, and Mrs. Ross should be invited to accompany him. Elsie acquiesced passively, and left the management of everything in her aunt's hands, only expressing a strong wish to go home that summer to see her father, since she might not be married from Rossie. But this request Aunt Caroline did not see fit to grant. The Laird at length, overwhelmed by the epistolary eloquence of Mrs. Lindsay, had consented to come to Chippingham with Euphemia, and grace his daughter's nuptials; Elsie would therefore, Aunt Caroline argued, see quite enough of him then; it was highly undesirable that she should be absent at a time when she was a source of so much pleasure and interest to others, and when her dresses might at any moment require to be fitted on.

Once more Elsie dully submitted, and, amidst all the bustle which Aunt Caroline raised, she moved about like one in a dream. A strange feeling of unreality possessed her, and it was not until she heard that David was actually on his way home, that she could bring herself to believe she was so soon to see him again. It was scarcely a shock to her at the time, when the startling news came, that David had only reached Suez to be recalled—that, the Chamberlain mission having failed, war with Shere Ali had been declared, and no soldier could be spared from his post.

Mrs. Lindsay was naturally both disappointed and apprehensive for her nephew's safety, but, her first agitation over, she bore up bravely on Elsie's account, and was also disposed to take her husband's view of the matter, for the General was cheerful and even exultant.

'This is a grand chance for Davie,' he would say, 'a fine opportunity of getting on. Shouldn't wonder if he saw some very pretty fighting. I remember when I was out there in '41——' and the General launched forth gleefully into reminiscences of his old campaigns. If Mrs. Lindsay sighed a little over the dangers of war, he scouted the idea of anything happening to his nephew. 'No fear of Davie not casting up—he always falls on his feet.'

But all these assurances failed to inspire Elsie with courage; she trembled whenever the post came in, and could not conceal her agitation at the least mention of fighting. Mrs. Lindsay first reasoned with her gently, and then took her to task seriously for want of faith, but Elsie said she could not help it. Perhaps the scenes she had passed through at Seathwaite had tried her nerves too much; perhaps the shadow of her coming grief was already over her. For Elsie's fears were but too well-founded, she never saw her lover again.

The winter passed slowly away, and anxiety gave way to thankfulness as news came from time to time of the success and gallantry of the British troops in making their way up the Afghan passes. Every one said the campaign would soon be at an end, and David was still safe. It was not till spring that the stroke, which Elsie had felt hanging over her for so long, came at last in its full force. David was killed in an action on the Cabul river, the report said that Lieutenant Lindsay was cut down while heading a charge into a dense mass of the enemy clustered round a standard, which he had succeeded in taking when he fell. He was dead when his comrades lifted him up, and no soothing message was conveyed to his friends to tell them that he remembered them in his last moments. Death had probably been instantaneous; that was all the comfort they received, except the knowledge that his name was spoken

of with honour, and that his brother officers sincerely mourned his loss.

This calamity fell like a thunderbolt upon the quiet household at the Elms, and Elsie was the only one who bore the news at first with outward calmness. She did not speak a word or shed a tear when the news was told her ; but as days went on, and Mrs. Lindsay first, and then the General, began to recover a little from the first shock of their grief, Elsie's face remained still and hopeless, and she seemed to have no thought or care for anything in this world. When they spoke to her of resignation and submission to the Divine will, she assented, saying gently that she had no cause to complain ; that she was no worse off than many others, and that she had been very happy ; and then she would entreat them with tears to leave her alone, and to have patience with her. She sat by herself as much as possible, shrinking from sight with the instinct of some wounded wild creature, which tries to creep into a hole to die. But Elsie did not die, although at first she hoped and prayed to do so ; by little and little she struggled back to life. There is no need to dwell on the sufferings of this poor heart ; indeed, few are so happy as to be unable to comprehend them in some measure.

The news of David's death came in April, and by the end of May Mrs. Lindsay, dismayed at her niece's low state of health and spirits, was willing to give up her most cherished prejudices for the sake of doing her good. During those first sad weeks nothing could have been more tender and considerate than her treatment of the girl. She behaved throughout with the greatest tact and forbearance, and did not let Miss Maynard tease her by well-meant condolences and caresses.

Mrs. Lindsay now offered to send Elsie home to Rossie for a change, or even to take her herself if necessary, which was really a most self-sacrificing proposal ; but Elsie, to her surprise, refused to go. 'You are very good, Aunt Caroline,' she said, 'but not yet—I do not think I could. Let me stay with you.'

Rosamond had written, first to Elsie, and then to Mrs.

Lindsay, inquiring very anxiously for her friend, and asking if she might come to her, but this also Elsie declined. 'I cannot speak about it,' she said. 'Give me time, Aunt Caroline—just a little time. I will do better by and by.'

By degrees, as the summer went on, she attained calmness; then a faint cheerfulness and interest in everyday things, which was at first assumed, then real; but she showed no wish to vary her life by any change, and she kept her thoughts and feelings to herself. Mrs. Lindsay was not satisfied, and she and Miss Maynard now began to consult together, and to shake their heads over her.

'There is a reserve,' Mrs. Lindsay would say, 'a shutting up of the heart against sympathy, which I feel to be really wrong; and yet she is perfectly tranquil now, and much stronger in health. If we suffer this impenetrability to grow upon her, hers will become a self-absorbed, a self-centred, and an unsympathising character!' and she looked fiercely at Miss Maynard, as if she dared her to contradict her.

'She does not care to speak about dear Ernest's sad loss,' observed Miss Maynard mournfully, 'but perhaps it recalls her own sorrow too vividly.'

'Nothing of the kind, Cecilia! I saw her amusing herself with the dogs not an hour after we heard the announcement.'

Mr. Maynard's young wife had lately died, in giving birth to a daughter, and this sad and startling event had once more called out all Mrs. Lindsay's sympathy and goodwill towards Ernest. She had forgiven the marriage in a formal sort of way, but could not make a friend of Mrs. Maynard, who was a foolish flighty young creature; still, as the widower seemed overcome with grief at his loss, she was unremitting in her attentions and kind messages; and the dead wife acquired a sort of sanctity in her eyes. She would have adopted the baby, had it not been instantly claimed by its mother's relations; and she was quite annoyed with Elsie for not shedding tears over it, and pressing it to her heart, as Miss Maynard had done, when she was first introduced to it. There seemed no use in

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expecting her niece and Mr. Maynard to console each other, neither showed the least wish to do so, and Mrs. Lindsay was quite at a loss for mental occupation, until, about the beginning of October, she received news from Alkerton.

Up to this time they had not heard a word about Lady Eleanor, directly or indirectly; Mrs. Lindsay had not given her much thought, and Elsie had not spoken on the subject. But now a letter came from Mr. Fitzgerald, asking leave to carry off Miss Ross for a visit to his wife, who had expressed a great wish to see her, and intimating that he might be expected at the Elms the following day.

When Mr. Fitzgerald came, he received a chastened welcome from Mrs. Lindsay, the black ribbons on whose cap trembled with emotion, as she conducted him to her boudoir for a confidential interview. The behaviour of the visitor was no less appropriate; he expressed himself in long well-chosen words, and now that he had exerted himself to pay this visit, which nothing but his wife's express command could have led him to undertake, he behaved heroically, and won golden opinions from his hostess.

'That is a man I respect,' she said emphatically to Miss Maynard in the evening. 'He has feeling, and he has principle. How thankful I feel that poor dear Eleanor has been vouchsafed such a helpmeet. What support must he not yield—what guidance!'

Miss Maynard turned up her eyes, and uttered an ecstatic gasp.

'He tells me,' pursued Mrs. Lindsay, 'that his wife's state of mind causes him very grave anxiety. Uncontrolled as poor dear Eleanor's feelings always were, she has given way to them, it appears, to a painful; to a culpable extent, and has reduced herself to a state of—in fact,' said Mrs. Lindsay, waving her hand, 'Mr. Fitzgerald had to call in the doctor.'

'And his opinion?' inquired Miss Maynard mildly.

'He prescribed change of air and scene. Mr. Fitzgerald would have taken her to Brighton, to the Continent,

anywhere—Eleanor would not move. Then as she was not to be crossed or thwarted—that doctor must have been most injudicious as well as weak—she of course continued without any improvement, until the other day she took a fancy that she would like to see dear Elsie. Her husband, always on the alert to anticipate her wishes, came—flew’—and Mrs. Lindsay spread out her arms, to illustrate the manner in which one might suppose Mr. Fitzgerald to have been wafted to the Elms—‘flew hither on the wings of love, and to-morrow returns, bearing our darling with him.’

‘To-morrow!’ exclaimed Miss Maynard aghast. ‘Then you have consented to dear Elsie’s——’

‘Undoubtedly,’ said Mrs. Lindsay, folding her arms with majesty. ‘Where there is a work of mercy to be done, I *never* hesitate.’

The wish which Lady Eleanor had expressed touched and pleased Elsie exceedingly, and she felt an eagerness to go, which she restrained for fear of hurting her aunt, but the latter was so occupied with Mr. Fitzgerald and his principles, that she never even thought of consulting Elsie’s feelings in the matter.

If Mr. Fitzgerald had flown to Chippingham on the wings of love, he certainly did not fly back on them, for Elsie had never before met with such a troublesome travelling companion. He fidgeted and complained incessantly; quarrelled with all the porters; threatened to bring an action against the railway company whenever he did not see his luggage; and gave his companion no peace till they arrived at Alkerton.

When they entered the house Elsie caught sight of Lady Eleanor’s tall figure coming out to meet them, and stayed a little behind, while Mr. Fitzgerald hastened to tell his wife how ill he was, and how much the journey had upset him, but Lady Eleanor took no notice of him at all except to put him aside with one hand, she went straight up to Elsie, put her arms round the girl and kissed her, then led her to her room without a word. ‘I knew you would come,’ she said, when they were alone together.

Elsie noticed how her face had grown thinner, and her

voice had lost its ring. 'You have been ill, Lady Eleanor,' she said softly.

'Oh yes, and they have been tormenting me with doctors,' she answered, still in the same spiritless voice. 'Did your aunt make a fuss about your coming? how did you get on with Frederick?'

'Aunt Caroline liked me to come——' began Elsie, and stopped, for Lady Eleanor did not seem to desire an answer. She sighed, looked vacantly round, and then left the room, saying she supposed she must attend to Frederick.

CHAPTER VIII.

‘I have built
Two chauntries, where the sad and solemn priests
Sing still for Richard’s soul. More will I do ;
Though all that I can do is nothing worth,
Since that my penitence comes after call,
Imploring pardon.’

ELSIE remained at Alkerton for many weeks ; her presence became almost a necessity to Lady Eleanor, who talked to her as she did to no one else, and regarded her with a great deal more affection, probably, than if Elsie had really been her daughter-in-law. The companionship was good for both, and gave Elsie in particular an interest in life. Hers was a nature which required some one to cherish and take care of, and she became passionately attached to David’s mother, who confided in her, and leant upon her ; speaking when they were alone as unreservedly as if Elsie had been a woman of her own age. She traced the whole course of David’s childhood and youth from the day of his birth, dwelling more particularly on the time when he first began to walk, ‘when every one who came to the house admired him,’ and she showed Elsie a collection of little soft curls of hair, cut from her children’s heads at various stages of their life. Then David’s school-boy letters were brought out, and dwelt upon one by one ; most of those he had written latterly she had not kept, which she regretted now with tears. Sometimes, but rarely, she had fits of remorse, when she said she had been unjust to David, and which it required all Elsie’s skill to soothe ; but it made her almost happy again to hear how her boy had loved and admired her, and how often he had spoken to Elsie of his mother.

'Oh, Elsie! it is so hard that he should have been the one to be taken from me. I never dreamt of it, never. We always said David was so lucky; I never was anxious about him because of that. He never gave me a moment's anxiety since he was born. But I was so proud of him, and I used to hope and plan things for him'—she stopped to wipe away the tears which were running down her face—'I was so sure he would distinguish himself. But oh! if I had known there would be fighting, I would never—never have let him go into the army.'

'Dear Lady Eleanor, we should not grudge him,' said Elsie earnestly, laying her hand upon her friend's knee. 'I do not. He was a soldier, you know, and he—he did his duty. What would become of the country if everybody kept back their sons?'

'I don't see how his being killed does the country the least good,' said Lady Eleanor disconsolately, 'and what is the use of people distinguishing themselves, and having medals and things if they are dead? I would not let Lionel enter one of those dangerous professions for anything in the world. Though Lionel is not David'—she ended with a heavy sigh—'*he* never got into scrapes.'

'Is Lionel not—not doing well at Oxford, then?'

'Ah well, I have had a great deal of trouble with him altogether. He has left Oxford now—you did not know that, by the bye—and his bills keep coming in, and that annoys Frederick so. He can't bear paying bills—though Lionel's debts are not very bad ones, poor boy. I wish sometimes he would come back.'

'Where is he then?' asked Elsie, 'since he has left Oxford?'

'He is still wandering about abroad,' said Lady Eleanor. 'He is at Vienna now, and talks of Paris as his next address—that looks as if he were on his way home, doesn't it?'

'Yes, certainly, I should say. Then he has been making a tour abroad?'

'It was Frederick's doing,' said Lady Eleanor wearily, 'he said he would not have him idling at home. You see Lionel was plucked—and then his debts—and he certainly

spoke very improperly to Frederick. But I wish he was at home again.'

'Is he working at anything?' asked Elsie.

'Oh yes, music. He has a passion for music, you know. He goes to all the operas he can—he says he wants to form his taste, and would take lessons if he could find any one fit to teach him. I wonder he can have the heart to play on the piano.'

It was curious how Elsie could put aside her own grief to comfort David's mother, and behaved as if the loss had not fallen so heavily upon herself. She now began to question her more particularly concerning Lionel, partly in order to divert her mind from her worst trouble; partly because she herself was anxious to have news of her former friend and playfellow. Lady Eleanor was always ready to talk of Lionel, and the loss of her younger son would really have been a far more crushing grief to her than that of David. Lionel had been idle and extravagant; no more serious faults could be imputed to him. He had a refined nature and tastes, which led him to avoid low associates, and to detest the grosser forms of dissipation. But he had given quite sufficient annoyance to his parents by his incorrigible idleness, although in some respects they misunderstood him. He had been excessively shocked and grieved at his brother's death, and had honestly set himself to work in order to make up to his mother in some measure for what she had lost. But he had let too much time slip away before, and though he worked his hardest for the few weeks he had left before his next examination, he was plucked, to his own disappointment, and the indignation of his parents, who now reproached him with being heartless and unfeeling as well as idle. This was too much for Lionel's temper to stand, and high words passed between him and his stepfather; the upshot of which was, that Lionel left home, rather under a cloud, to pursue his so-called musical studies abroad. There, having no particular inducement to work, and thinking himself rather hardly used by both parents, he relapsed somewhat into his former idle ways, although his

character had gained in manliness and gravity since David's death.

Lady Eleanor did not see or know all this, but Elsie partly divined it from the story she told, and felt sorry for Lionel, whom she always judged leniently. She tried to impress his mother with her view of the case, and Lady Eleanor was very ready to listen to her, and would bring up the subject over and over again for the sake of having it repeated; until they both persuaded themselves that Lionel was an injured martyr, deserving of the tenderest and most respectful treatment. It was well for Lady Eleanor's happiness that she had taken up this idea; for she had greatly added to her burden of sorrow by trying, however unsuccessfully, to harden her heart against her remaining son. She now wrote affectionately, urging him to come home; and Mr. Fitzgerald, to please his wife, consented to overlook all hasty expressions on Lionel's part, on condition that the latter ceased to expect him to keep hunters for him, or to pay any more of his debts.

Lionel accordingly returned to Alkerton a little before Christmas. His coming cheered up the household, though at first he was unlike the Lionel of old times, grave and sometimes low-spirited. He treated Elsie with a sort of tender reverence, and was exceedingly thoughtful for her comfort; at first indeed he hardly dared to speak to her, but watched her from afar with wistful admiring eyes. By degrees he became more familiar; and when Elsie talked to him and tried to draw him out, he gave her his confidence very fully. He knew he was an idle dog, he would say, and good for nothing, he had got into the habit of it. He would go out to Australia, that was the only thing he was fit for. This was in his most desponding moods, which gradually became rarer, as his walks and talks with Elsie were more frequent. He had another scheme for his more cheerful hours. He would go to Ardvoir and live there, when the present tenant's lease had expired; build cottages, and improve the condition of his tenantry; and keep a steam-yacht. Neither would he listen to any nonsense from his tenants (mind you); but they under his judicious and

paternal rule, would become so intelligent that they would in time refrain from making any idiotic suggestions about reductions of rent, or undue burnings of heather.

To all this Elsie listened and smiled ; she favoured the Ardvoira scheme more than the Australian one, but she knew that his mother really did not know what to do with the boy, and that she and Mr. Fitzgerald had some new plan for him every day. Lady Eleanor was now fairly cheerful again, and seldom spoke of David, unless it were to allude to his untimely death as a reason for keeping Lionel out of any possible danger. Mr. Fitzgerald proposed that his stepson should travel for a year or two, and this Elsie too thought rather a sensible suggestion, but Lady Eleanor would not hear of it. She watched Lionel's evident devotion to Elsie with favour, and contrived to take credit to herself for thinking that she would not throw obstacles in the way of her child's happiness, and that if he chose to fall in love with Elsie, she would not oppose it, or seek out a more worldly match for him. To be sure Elsie evidently looked upon him as a mere boy, but that, Lady Eleanor argued with herself, was very ridiculous, and she would soon find out her mistake, for Lionel was, in reality, some months older, and where would she see a handsomer or more charming young man ?

'No,' she said to Elsie, who was advocating the advantages of foreign travel, 'I will not let him go so far away, I know something would happen to him, and it would be most foolish and wrong of me to do it ; for I believe'—she lowered her voice—'we are an unfortunate family. Last spring,' she went on after a pause, 'I wanted Frederick to sell Alkerton and go back to Devonshire, but, would you believe it ? he would not do it ; he is very obstinate sometimes. He said he could only do so at a dead loss, and he could not afford that. But I made him do up the church.'

'But why?' said Elsie ; 'I saw the church was restored. Did Mr. Fitzgerald do all that at his own expense ?'

'Yes,' said Lady Eleanor. 'he did, for I made him. Frederick did not want to do it, and really I can't blame

him: most expensive it was. But I am perfectly convinced that it is not safe to live on Church lands the way we have been doing, and to give nothing back. You see what has happened already; and after such a terrible warning, it is surely my duty to be a little extra careful of Lionel. Look what happened to the Pophams, who lived here before us: I heard the whole story the first time I went over to Bulcote. I forget exactly what it was, but I know they broke their necks or something, and it was the eldest son it happened to.'

Lady Eleanor was apt to be a little incoherent in her vehemence, and Elsie looked at her rather puzzled. *

'And did the Freemans warn you then?' she asked. 'Did they advise you to restore the church?'

'No, it was my own idea,' answered Lady Eleanor with a little pride. 'Frederick says it is nonsense and waste of money, but we shall see. When a thing is *right*, what does a little expense signify?'

It seemed almost as if Alkerton were to become Elsie's permanent home, for Lady Eleanor declared herself quite unable to live without her young companion; but an urgent letter from Mrs. Lindsay recalled her to Chippingham the following spring to see her uncle, the General, who was alarmingly ill. The poor old gentleman had felt his nephew's death acutely, and it had told upon him a good deal. All that autumn he had been visibly feebler, though he made no complaint; and the cold winter, followed by a colder spring, had weakened him still further. He was now seized with an attack of bronchitis, and for some days his life was in danger; though when Elsie came home he was beginning to mend, and his recovery was steady though slow. During Elsie's absence Mrs. Lindsay had been chiefly occupied with Ernest Maynard; but when he had ceased talking about his wife and infant daughter, and the novelty of his bereavement had worn off, she began to feel dull, and longed for her niece to come home. Now the General's health engrossed Mrs. Lindsay's thoughts entirely.

Elsie did not like to go away again, as her presence pleased her uncle in his still weak state; but as the spring

wore on she began to turn her thoughts to Rossie, and her father wrote expressing a wish to see her in the summer. No sooner, however, had the General recovered from his bronchitis than he began to take his old attacks again ; with this difference, that he made sure each time that he was going to die, and insisted upon sending for any of his relations who might be within reach to witness his last moments. This had happened twice, and Elsie, thinking there was nothing really to be alarmed about, prepared to start for Scotland in June ; the General appearing to resign himself to the plan. Two days before her proposed journey, however, he suddenly seemed to take in that she was really going to leave him, and inquired how long she would be away. Elsie said about a month or six weeks. The General fidgeted, and said by and by, 'Can ye get a telegraph at Rossie?'

'There is a telegraph office at Drumsheugh, Uncle Henry,' replied Elsie rather reluctantly.

'Drumsheugh ! That's ten miles off. I don't think,' he said looking at his wife, 'she'll get back in time to see me die.'

Mrs. Lindsay gesticulated imperatively from her corner unseen by her husband, and Elsie said in a cheerful tone : 'Are you not feeling so well, Uncle Henry ? I will put off going for a little till you are stronger.'

'Yes, yes, my dear, put off for a little,' said the old man fretfully. 'I'll not trouble you long.'

Elsie wrote home accordingly to put off her visit, upon which the General rallied immediately, and became more like his old self than he had been for a year ; but as he showed symptoms of a relapse whenever his niece's departure was hinted at, she at length gave up hopes of going to Scotland that summer. She might have gone in autumn as far as the General's health was concerned ; but when she proposed to do so, her father wrote to the effect that, as she had let all the good weather go by, she might just wait for another year. He did not wish her to come and catch her death of cold, especially as he understood from Mrs. Lindsay that she had a cough.

Elsie was really not feeling strong ; and when, that same autumn, her friend Rosamond Seathwaite wrote to say that she was going to take Mona to the south of France for the winter, and was most anxious that Elsie should accompany them, even Mrs. Lindsay urged her niece to accept the invitation. Whether from weakness of body or sadness of mind, Elsie felt indifferent, and disinclined to move from where she was unless it was her positive duty to do so ; but she could not resist her friend's loving entreaties, and went ; and once in the sunny Riviera much of her old vigour came back to her. Rosamond's companionship, too, was a great delight, and did her much good ; and Mona, now grown a very sweet, though quiet little maiden, became especially devoted to Hans, whom Elsie could not find it in her heart to leave behind her. Poor little gentle Hans, whose eyes had become so pathetic now that his mistress fancied that her long and frequent absences were making him old before his time, and bringing premature white hairs round his little brown nose.

CHAPTER IX.

*‘Er ist gereist, kommt aus Paris und Rheims
Und bringt sein treu altenglisch Herz zurtück.’*

THE little party of friends having spent the winter very pleasantly at San Remo, were on their way back to England in May, and only stopped to spend a week or ten days in Paris.

Rosamond was, upon the whole, well in health, and had long since recovered from the shock to her nerves, but her spirits were still variable, which a little disappointed Elsie. She was very much as she had been at Alkerton before her husband's death, except that, alone with Elsie and Mona, there was nothing to provoke and irritate her, and her temper was consequently sweeter. The troublesome law business, consequent on Sir Roger's eccentric will, was ended, and the will set aside on the ground of insanity.

Elsie, knowing Rosamond's former history, longed to speak to her about Ponsonby, and was often on the point of doing so, but there was a reserve about her friend which kept her back, and she did not dare even to mention his name in a casual way, as she knew that Rose was quite sharp enough to perceive that she had done it with a purpose, and might, indeed probably would, be displeased.

Whilst Elsie was at Alkerton the winter before, she had received a letter from Ponsonby, who, it appeared, had gone to Chippingham in hopes of seeing her, and was disappointed at not finding her there. He had gone to the Elms, he said, in order to make his adieux to her and to Mrs. Lindsay, before undertaking a voyage round the world, as he would probably be absent for a few years. Elsie was

grieved and perplexed by this letter: she thought if she had seen Ponsonby she might have understood something of his motives and purposes. She could not help speaking of it to Lady Eleanor, and expressing her regret, to which the latter replied in her off-hand way that she supposed the poor man thought he had no chance with Rose, as there was a report that she was going to marry Sir George Seathwaite; although, Lady Eleanor added, she did not for her part think such an event likely to happen, as probably Rose had had more than enough of the family. Elsie's intercourse with Rosamond showed her that there was no truth whatever in this report, but she was sure her friend was not happy.

But on the last day of their stay in Paris a most unexpected incident occurred. Elsie was strolling along the Rue de Rivoli alone, Rosamond and Mona having gone to lunch with an acquaintance, when the sound of unmistakable English voices caught her ear; and the street was presently obstructed by an English family, consisting of nine children, who were marching along in threes, their parents bringing up the rear.

Paterfamilias stopped Elsie and demanded: 'Ou est le omnibus pour—pour——'

'Aller,' suggested his wife.

'Pour aller a Napoleon's tombe?'

'Monsieur,' began Elsie, fearing he might be offended if she spoke English, 'Je ne sais pas—I don't know when the omnibuses run;' and at the same moment the lady exclaimed, 'Why, John, it is Miss Ross!'

Mr. Freeman, for he it was, shook hands with Elsie heartily, saying, 'I ask your pardon, I am sure, for taking you for a Frenchwoman. I wish I was at home again with all my heart, but now we *are* here, I suppose we must see the sights.'

'I am afraid I can't help you,' said Elsie.

'Well, here's a native, I'll ask him,' and Mr. Freeman made a rush across the pavement, and pouncing upon a young man who was passing, loudly demanded 'Napoleon's tombe?'

The stranger gazed upon him for a minute without speaking, and then quietly gave him the desired information in English. It was not till the Freeman family had passed on that Elsie recognised Ponsonby, who had stood waiting until she had done speaking to them, and now greeted her, smiling at her astonishment.

‘And who, Miss Ross, are your charming friends?’ he inquired, as by one consent they turned and crossed over into the Tuileries Gardens.

‘They are neighbours at Alkerton. I never dreamt of meeting them in Paris, nor you either, Mr. Ponsonby.’

‘It is very extraordinary our meeting,’ replied Ponsonby gravely, ‘at least it would have been if I had not happened to know you were here; but I saw Mrs. Lindsay lately, and she told me where you were—and *whom you were with.*’

Elsie looked up quickly at the last words.

‘I wondered to meet you here, Miss Ross,’ went on Ponsonby, breaking a twig off a shrub, and crushing it in his hand as he spoke, ‘seeing that Mrs. Lindsay did not deem your associates desirable for you.’

‘No, but she deemed that—that I had better go abroad,’ said Elsie with an embarrassed laugh. ‘Are you going to stay some time in Paris, Mr. Ponsonby?’

‘That will depend,’ replied Ponsonby with great suavity, ‘upon whether I succeed in what I came for.’

He walked on thoughtfully for a few paces, and then suddenly assuming an air of gaiety, said to his companion—

‘And what are your first impressions of Paris, Miss Ross? and have you bought a great many dresses? Is it not a very delightful city? This avenue of trees, with the Arc de Triomphe at the end and all those nice figures on the top of it, you know, is one of the things I admire most. Do you think I may come and see Lady Sea-thwaite?’

‘Yes,’ said Elsie, ‘Come.’ She said it bluntly, feeling utterly unable to reply in her companion’s strain. ‘And come to-night, for we are going away to-morrow.’

Ponsonby became grave again instantly. ‘At what

hour,' said he, 'may I hope to find Lady Seathwaite disengaged?'

They were now opposite the hotel, and Elsie prepared to go in. 'I will tell her you are coming at five o'clock this afternoon,' she said. 'And I—I *hope* she will be in.' She gave him her hand as if to wish him good luck, and went in quickly.

Rosamond received Elsie's intimation that Mr. Ponsonby was coming to call upon her at five o'clock with an affectation of extreme indifference, merely remarking that she supposed they would want some more cake for tea. This gave Elsie the excuse she had been seeking for to take herself and Mona out of the way; and they set out rather late to buy the cake, which Elsie contrived should be a very lengthy business. When at last they could delay no longer, and came in, Ponsonby was still sitting with Rose; and both had a look of content upon their faces which was not difficult to read. Rosamond was apparently glad to see her and Mona, however, and scolded them for the length of time they had stayed out.

'A whole hour to buy one cake!' she said. 'Look at it!' And she uncovered it and held it up to derision.

'But Elsie would not go to any of the near shops,' piped out Mona in her childish voice, 'because Mr. Ponsonby does not like their kinds of cakes.'

Elsie felt it hard that she should be so mocked at for her well-meant little plot, which after all had answered very well; but Rosamond continued in a mocking humour, and it was not until long after Mona had gone to bed that she would bestow any confidence upon Elsie.

'You are a regular little whited sepulchre,' she said that night; 'I did not know you had it in you to be so deep. So you knew all about me from the beginning. Why did you not tell me?'

'Well, Rose, if I did wrong you must forgive me. I could not at first—I knew before I ever saw you, because David had told me; and then of course you were married. And afterwards—I might have told you at San Remo certainly, and once or twice I nearly did, but—there was

something about you which made me think you would not like it. But I am *very* glad, dear Rose.'

'Are you?' said Rose. 'Well, I don't know whether it is a thing to be glad about or not. He took me by surprise you know, as if it was a matter of course that I would jump at it, but I don't see that at all. Men are all alike,' she went on, pouting a little. 'So exceedingly cautious. He took very good care not to come near me until he was quite sure of me.'

'Until the law business about the will was settled?' said Elsie. 'But I think that was so very nice of him. He would have put you into the position of having to choose between him and Mona, and he would rather have the pain of waiting.'

'It is a pain he did not seem to feel very much,' said Rose. 'The thing was settled long ago, and where was he, if you please? Amusing himself with Queen Emma in the Sandwich Islands. Besides,' she added, with her face turned away, 'suppose it had been given against me?'

But Elsie declined to argue upon this possibility.

'It was not—it would not have been,' she said. But she knew from that moment that her friend would have consented to give up her child, and live apart from her, rather than from the man she loved.

CHAPTER X.

'Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments.'

PONSONBY accompanied the party of travellers when they returned to England, and Elsie went straight back to Chippingham, as her plan was to remain there until the end of July, which was the time fixed for Rosamond's marriage, and after that event go on to Scotland.

She was not received with any particular enthusiasm by her aunt or Miss Maynard; indeed, she found herself rather *de trop*, as it was evident that something peculiarly exciting had been going on, into the mysteries of which she was not permitted to penetrate. At first Elsie thought it must relate to Emma Dale, who had been married during her absence abroad, and who had just started for Canada with her husband, the outfit having been provided by Mrs. Lindsay; but Emma and her backwoodsman were as nothing to Mrs. Lindsay, compared with the present theme of her thoughts.

Sophy, it appeared, had been paying a long visit at the Elms, and was to return in summer. Her name was not often mentioned, but when it did occur, she was spoken of with pomp as 'dear Sophia,' or 'our late beloved inmate;' and Elsie, happening to say regretfully that she was sorry she had missed seeing 'dear old Sophy,' was most severely reproved, and was quite in disgrace for the rest of the day.

'If you permit yourself to speak thus of Sophia,' said Mrs. Lindsay, 'who is equal to yourself in social standing, and superior in many points infinitely more important, I

do not know whither, Elspeth, a longer course of association with the worldly and unscrupulous may lead you.'

'Times are changed,' thought Elsie; but she accepted the rebuke in silence, merely taking the first opportunity of asking Miss Maynard whether Sophy were going to be married, and if so, to whom? But she received no definite answer.

'N—no, oh no,' Miss Maynard said. 'I have no reason to suppose so, none whatever, dear.' And she seemed so ill at ease that Elsie good naturedly changed the subject and put by her curiosity for the present.

The General had now become much feebler, and a good deal deaf, and his wife did not, as before, go to him about all her schemes and perplexities; it troubled the old man, who wished to be left in peace. He liked having Elsie with him, and she made him her chief care during the six weeks she remained at Chippingham.

When the middle of July came she was allowed to go back to Rose, who was in London, at her parent's house in Cadogan Place. Elsie was glad to go, although from any experience she had had of brides, she expected to be entirely the giver, not the receiver, of sympathy. But she need not have misjudged her friend; whatever Rosamond's faults might be, she was not a selfish woman, and she was as affectionate to Elsie, and as interested about all her affairs, as if she had none of her own to occupy her thoughts. She made Elsie tell her all about Chippingham, 'to amuse her,' she said; but in reality she wanted to give the girl advice about her future plans. Elsie told her that she was going home to Rossie that year, of which Rose approved.

'Of course,' she said, 'you ought to be with your father.'

'Yes,' said Elsie; 'and if I find he likes it, I think I will just stay on.'

Rosamond turned the matter seriously over in her mind, and took Ponsonby into her counsels.

'I am very sorry for Elsie,' she said. 'I do not know where that poor girl is to live. She is quite pleased now at the thoughts of going home, but I am certain she won't be able to stand Euphemia and the children. Then she

will go and stay with Aunt Eleanor, and be dragged into a marriage with Lionel. I've no patience with them——'

'A marriage with Lionel!' said Ponsonby. 'Never! she is a great deal too good for that boy.'

'I do not say that she would have him,' said Rose. 'I do not suppose she would. She does not even see that he is in love with her (which is very odd); but when Aunt Eleanor sets her heart upon a thing, she will get her own way sooner or later.'

'But it is absurd!' said Ponsonby; 'it must be prevented. Would you wish—would you like her to live with us?'

'I do not think she would do it, William,' said Rose with a smile, which went far to repay her lover for his really generous proposal. 'She must pay us long visits, and we must defeat Aunt Eleanor if we can. I would give her a hint about Lionel, but she is so innocent it might only do harm.'

The wedding took place in London, and was very quiet. The only guests, besides Elsie, were Rosamond's parents, her two brothers, her sister Blanche, and Lady Eleanor; Lionel was not invited, and Mr. Fitzgerald excused himself on the plea of illness. Elsie was specially desired to bring Hans, and did so at Mona's earnest entreaty, though she would have preferred to leave him behind. Rosamond insisted upon doing everything herself; she arranged the flowers, entertained the company, and behaved, as Lady Mary rather querulously observed, as if somebody else were being married.

Lady Eleanor proposed to carry off Elsie and Mona to Alkerton as soon as the wedding was over, there to remain until she and Mr. Fitzgerald went to Scotland, for they were to spend the autumn at Ardvoir.

'We will all go to Scotland together,' she said, when she heard of Elsie's intention of going home. 'That will be a charming plan, Elsie, and you shall pay me a visit at Ardvoir before you go to your father.'

Elsie demurred at this, but Lady Eleanor would hear of no objection.

'No, indeed,' she said, 'I cannot let you off, Elsie. The house at Ardvoira is an absolute den of disorder; I shall never put it right without your help. Then you will like the scenery and all that; Lionel is dying to show it to you—it is quite his hobby just now. You know he is never happy unless *you* are there,' and Lady Eleanor looked as if this last argument must infallibly settle the question, but Rosamond took her friend aside on the first opportunity.

'Don't go to Ardvoira with her,' she said. 'You will not if you are wise.'

'I do think it would be better not,' Elsie said; 'but how can I refuse Lady Eleanor? It *is* a trying journey with Mr. Fitzgerald—and then if there is nothing comfortable in the house—and she is not very strong, you know——'

'Stuff and nonsense!' interrupted Rosamond with energy. 'I really can't think, Elsie, how you can let yourself be made a slave of by that woman! She is as well able to do things for herself as you or I. There is nothing the matter with her—except selfishness. And you heard what she said about Lionel.'

'That is her way of talking,' said Elsie. 'Lionel means nothing; but for many reasons I would rather not go to Ardvoira.'

She dropped the subject, for she felt it was one upon which she and Rosamond would never agree. Rosamond had no sympathy with Lady Eleanor, whose charms did not appeal to her in the least; and she had very little patience with Lionel. She could not help rather liking that young man when he was actually before her, and always treated him in a pleasant, cousinly way; but the moment he was out of her sight she remembered his faults rather than his virtues, and being energetic herself, she had no toleration for idleness, especially in a man. She was ambitious, too, as well as active, and was no sooner married than she began to stir up her husband to distinguish himself in some way. She would have liked him best to go into Parliament; but finding after repeated efforts that politics

were not Ponsonby's vocation, she set him to write books of travel, and illustrate them with his own drawings, since he had failed to make a reputation as a great painter. But all this came to pass in later years, and in the meantime the newly married pair went to finish Ponsonby's interrupted tour round the world, from which 'urgent private affairs,' in other words, the news of Sir George Scathwaite's marriage to a cousin of his own, had recalled him in the spring.

We must now return to Elsie, who went with Lady Eleanor to Alkerton, Lionel having already gone to Scotland. Elsie had not really disregarded her friend's warning; and her eyes being now partly opened to Lady Eleanor's schemes concerning her, she spent many anxious hours in pondering upon how she had best undeceive her. For Elsie to become Lionel's wife was an impossibility, an incongruity not to be dreamt of for a moment. She did not seriously believe the boy to be in love with her, but it was undoubtedly better that they should meet as little as possible until this foolish fancy had passed away. She therefore remained firm to her intention of returning to Chippingham, until one day she received a letter from Miss Maynard which had the effect of materially altering her plans. The letter contained the solution of the enigma which had puzzled her at Chippingham, but which she had since forgotten.

'THE ELMS, CHIPPINGHAM,

'August 15th.

'MY DEAREST ELSIE—During the press of engagements which has rendered your dear aunt (busy as she always is) more than usually occupied, she has named me as her substitute to convey to you tidings which, we trust, will give you *heartfelt pleasure*, while they cannot fail to *surprise* you. I have so much to tell you, dear Elsie, that I feel quite embarrassed how to begin—*embarras de richesses*! Do you remember, dear, asking me a curiously *à propos* question regarding dear Sophia? I was able to answer truthfully at that time that she was *not* engaged to be married; but, my

love, she now is so and will (D.V.) shortly become the bride of my dear nephew Ernest! This will take you by surprise, as it did me; but to your dear aunt's *keen vision* the progress of the attachment has long been apparent. She observed dear Sophia's unusual depression during her first visit to us whilst you were abroad, and at once drew from her its *true cause*; but as Ernest had not spoken she did not feel justified in taking any steps in the matter. When Sophy returned to us in July Ernest's diffidence was still very great, but, thanks to your aunt, it has now been overcome, and the young people are on the footing of *affianced lovers*. I confess I despaired of this ever being brought about, but your dear aunt, with her usual decision, did not allow the young people to endanger their own happiness by *false pride*, and herself told Ernest plainly that he had engaged the affections of a young and interesting girl whom he would find *in the dining-room*. The result, my love, you already know, and the happiness of the young pair is *complete*. The marriage will take place (D.V.) at Michaelmas, and I know that Sophia intends asking you to stand nearest to her at the altar in the character of *bridesmaid*. Next week our happy 'nest among the Elms' will be deserted; your uncle and aunt, with dear Sophia, intend going to London for a fortnight. Very pleasant apartments have been secured near Kensington Gardens, where your amiable uncle loves to walk, the heat there not being so intense as in the street; while your aunt and Sophy, with Parkins's assistance, will busy themselves with purchases. I hope, meanwhile, to remain with Ernest at the vicarage and endeavour to put it in order for its future inmate. Your aunt desires me to inform you, with her love, of these arrangements, as she thinks it a pity for you to incur the *needless fatigue* and expense of returning to Chippingham before your Scottish visit is paid. Sophy, who has just come in, desires her *very best love*, and wishes that you were here. All unite in kindest remembrances to Lady Eleanor and her circle,—and I am ever, dearest Elsie, your affectionate old friend,

'CECILIA MAYNARD.'

Elsie did not at first regard this letter as bearing upon her own plans, and expressed her indignation aloud.

‘It is too bad—it really *is* too bad! She can’t leave that poor man alone. I shall not go near them—I would not be Sophy’s bridesmaid for——’

‘My dear Elsie, what is the matter?’ said Lady Eleanor. ‘I declare you are quite excited.’

Elsie read the letter aloud, and Lady Eleanor listened to it with great coolness.

‘Mr. Maynard is the clergyman, is he not? Oh yes, very nice that he should marry her niece. Rather an amusing letter, I think; it is so like your Aunt Caroline to arrange it all. Well, Elsie, that quite settles it, you see—you come to Scotland with me.’

Elsie bit her lips, she saw how incautious she had been; but there was no drawing back now without seriously vexing her hostess, so she yielded with as good a grace as she could, and the Scottish journey was arranged for the following week.

Little Mona, with her governess, was to be sent to Wynchcombe; and to her Elsie entrusted Hans, to be taken care of until her return. She felt quite satisfied in doing this, the child and the dog being inseparable; and the prospect of keeping Hans made Mona perfectly happy.

PART III.

CHAPTER I.

' Sweet Wicklow mountains ! the sunlight shining
On your green hills, is a picture rare ;
You crowd around me like young girls peeping,
And puzzling me to say which is most fair.
You seem to watch your own sweet faces
Reflected in the smooth and silver sea ;
My blessing on those lovely places,
Though no one knows how dear they are to me.'

FIVE years is a long time out of a girl's life ; and to Elsie especially, who had gone through such varied experiences since she had left her home, the period which she had spent in England was like a lifetime in itself. She had never forgotten her home, and still looked back to it often and lovingly ; yet she had had a strong presentiment on leaving Rossie that that*page in her life was over and done with for ever ; and even now it seemed impossible to be going back to it. She had something of the same feeling now as regarded Chippingham, which Miss Maynard's letter had helped to strengthen. Sophy, it appeared, had taken her place, and she would never be quite the same to Aunt Caroline again. This was, of course, partly her own doing. She had found David's relations more congenial ; and yet the feeling that the Chippingham life too had slipped away from her gave her keen pain. Many a time she had felt that she must get away from Aunt Caroline in order to breathe freely, that she could not stand another day in her society ; yet Elsie could not but be touched by the wonderful kindness and affection with which her aunt had always treated her ; and it was to her now that her thoughts turned regretfully, far more than to

her friend Miss Maynard—more even than to the kind old General.

Elsie had leisure and quiet for all these thoughts while in the train on their northward journey, for Lady Eleanor would stand no nonsense from her husband when *she* was travelling with him, and the least word of complaint from the unhappy Frederick was speedily quenched by the suggestion that he might get into a separate carriage if he was going to grumble, as she, Lady Eleanor, was not going to sit there to be annoyed.

The journey as far as Glasgow, however, was not a very fatiguing one. Elsie had never considered herself a very patriotic person, nor thought it necessary to assert the superiority of Scotland over England in any way; yet her soul within her was not so dead as to deserve the curses of the Last Minstrel; for as she stood on the platform of the crowded Glasgow station, watching a miscellaneous heap of luggage being tumbled out of the van, a smile of pleasure lit up her face at the porter's 'Bide there a wee, till I get a hurly.' She had never been at Glasgow before, and had no particular sentiment connected with that city, yet even the Glasgow accent, hideous as it is, sounded friendly to her ears.

The night was spent at St. Enoch's Hotel, and the journey next day was accomplished partly by rail and partly by steamer. It was between three and four in the afternoon that the steamer was brought to a stop, to permit the party to get into the little boat which now drew up alongside of her.

For the last hour and a half they had been passing through lovely scenery, and Elsie sat on the steamer's deck watching the gulls following in their wake, or looking out at the green Argyllshire hills and the soft and misty islands with a growing pain at her heart. 'How shall I bear it?' she said to herself, with her hands clasped tight together; 'why did I let them bring me?'

The sudden stop of the steamer, and the hissing noise the boiler made, startled her out of her sad thoughts. Down below was a little boat, which seemed perilously heaving up

and down on the waves caused by the great steamer's paddle-wheel, for the sea itself was as smooth as glass ; and in the boat stood a young man in gray shooting clothes and a little gray cap. He was steadying the ladder by which the passengers were to descend, and looking up eagerly into the steamer, his handsome, still boyish face all alight with joyful expectation.

'Lionel ! my dear boy, do be careful. What a place to get down !'

'Steady, mother ! give me your other hand—you are all right. Now, Elsie !' and before Elsie could think, she was fairly lifted down in Lionel's strong arms and placed beside his mother in the stern, while he looked at her with an evident delight which called forth an answering smile in spite of herself.

'Take care, Frederick !' in an agonised voice from Lady Eleanor, as the terrified Frederick seemed about to precipitate himself into the sea, and Lionel, clutching his step-father's leg, pulled him into the boat.

'I wish you would not get in like that,' she said, as her husband sank down, panting, amongst the luggage ; 'it does make me so nervous. You must stay there now, I suppose, or you will upset the boat, and we shall all be drowned.'

Another boat now came up to take off the servants and the heavier luggage, and the big steamer went on her way. Lionel taking one pair of oars, seated himself opposite, and talked to his mother, answering her questions and complaints in a cheery pleasant way, while his eyes strayed to Elsie's face. She herself sat looking out, wistful and abstracted. As yet they could gain no view of the house, which was hidden by a point they had to round before reaching the little harbour. The sun of early autumn shone softly through a veil of mist ; the sea was silvery gray in the distance where the shadows of the clouds left lines of light ; the far-off islands were faint and yet distinct, their outlines nearly white against the pale gold sky. Near them now, the rocky point stood out bold and rugged, and by the boat's sides every stone and shell and bit of seaweed could

be seen as plainly through the depths of clear green water as in the shallowest stream.

The point was passed, and they entered a small loch or narrow inlet, and drew near to the little pier. The house was just visible among the trees, a long low house, blue slated, with white walls, rough cast, or harled, as it is called in Scotland. Behind the house was a bank of natural wood—oak, birch, mountain-ash, and hazel—still clothed in the deep green of late summer. The thin line of smoke, which rose up in the still air straight from the chimneys, showed blue against the dark background. The house was fenced round by hills; sharp rocky hills, steep green hills, heathery hills, stretching away indefinitely, and vaguely termed ‘the shootings.’ A wooded gorge ran up into this wild region, and lost itself in its windings; through it a brown river ran, murmuring amongst the trees, foaming between narrow walls of rock past the house, till near the landing-place it took its final leap, and dashed into the still gray sea.

The landing was effected without difficulty, and the party walked to the house, Lionel keeping close to Elsie’s side, but speaking little, for which she was grateful. The house was surrounded by smooth, green turf; and large myrtle and fuschia bushes, untouched by frost in that mild, damp climate, grew before the door. The rooms were low, and rather small, but looked home-like to Elsie’s eyes, though Lady Eleanor groaned over them as ‘uninhabitable.’ The library, where tea awaited them, was rather like the cabin of a ship; floor, walls, and ceiling being all of varnished pine; books were there in plenty, but invisible behind their panelled doors.

‘How musty the house does smell,’ said Lady Eleanor, sinking into a chair behind the tea-table. ‘All houses in the Highlands have that smell, I think. It is very odd; I hope it is not rats, Elsie?’

‘Oh, no!’ said Elsie faintly, ‘rats smell quite different; I *like* this smell. Shall I make tea for you, dear Lady Eleanor? you look tired.’

‘Do,’ said Lady Eleanor, ‘it would be a charity.’ She

rose out of the rather hard arm-chair, and stretched herself discontentedly on the still harder sofa. 'Of all detestable countries to travel in, I do think Scotland is the most detestable,' she said. 'No, Frederick, you need not argue —' as Mr. Fitzgerald uttered an inarticulate grunt. 'What I have gone through on this journey no words can tell.'

Lionel looked a little vexed, but did not contradict his mother. Elsie thought him graver and more manly than he used to be; he was attentive to every one's comfort, and particularly gentle and thoughtful towards herself, seeming to know instinctively what she was feeling, and avoiding everything which might distress her. He kept near her and watched her, but spoke little; and her first evening in David's home passed more peacefully than she had dared to hope

CHAPTER II.

' I now can see with better eyes ;
And worldly grandeur I despise,
And fortune with her gifts and lies.

HAD a traveller been going along the road which passed the gate of Ardvoira, he would have come in time to the head of the loch, some three miles farther on. Here stood the parish church ; a small, square, white building, harled and blue-slated like the houses, and adorned with a little belfry. There was a village, or what was dignified by the name of one ; a few miserable-looking, thatched cottages, from whose chimneyless roofs the peat smoke curled, giving forth a strange, pungent fragrance. The manse was close by, shut in by shrubs, which from neglect had grown into a thick, tangled wilderness, overgrown by brambles. It had an uninhabited look, but a minister existed nevertheless ; an aged man, whose wife had died some twenty years before ; his sons had grown up and gone to distant towns ; and he, with no servant but an old Highland housekeeper, lived in a corner of the neglected manse. He was almost too old to carry on his duties, and an assistant and successor was in course of being appointed, which occasioned considerable excitement throughout the parish.

About a mile farther up the glen was another dwelling, nestling among the hills, which was a remarkable contrast to the dirty, deserted-looking manse. This was Glen Torran, the residence of Mr. Carmichael, a retired East India merchant, who in his early years had led a sea-faring life, but now devoted himself to farming. By birth Mr.

Carmichael was a Lowlander, but an innate love of sport and a certain fancy for the Highlands had led him to buy Glen Torran, where he and his wife had now spent many happy years. Their children were all grown up and settled in life; their eldest daughter Isabella had married Lord Ochil, who, it may be remembered, was Captain Ross's neighbour at Drumsheugh. Mrs. Carmichael's motherly heart could not be satisfied without children about her, and she generally contrived to have with her some of her numerous grandchildren, who naturally looked upon Glen Torran as an earthly paradise. A very bright little place it looked on this August morning, with its gay flower-beds, trim hedges, and little porch clustered over with creepers. Mrs. Carmichael was weeding in the garden, a pleasant sight in her shady straw bonnet, and gown thriftily tucked up. She was a charming old lady, stout, fair, and comely; perhaps sixty-five years of age, but her figure was still upright, and her complexion as fresh as that of many a girl of twenty.

Her two little grandsons, Walter and Hughie Forbes, Lady Ochil's youngest children, were sharing with the wasps the last remaining gooseberries.

'Somebody is calling you, grandmamma,' said one of the children, and Mrs. Carmichael heard her name shouted from the house door. 'Catharine! Catharine!' called her husband impatiently.

'What is it you want?' she said, digging viciously at a dandelion root with her trowel.

Mr. Carmichael came forward—a hale old gentleman, with gray whiskers and a wide-awake hat.

'Here's Mr. M'Phail,' said he.

Mrs. Carmichael gathered herself up and came forward, all smiles, to greet the aged minister.

'How do you do, Mr. M'Phail?' she called into his deaf ears. 'It's a far walk for you. Walter, speak to me.' She drew the little boy close to her and whispered, 'Go and get your faces washed for luncheon, both of you, and tell Christina to lay a place for Mr. M'Phail. Say "How do you do" first. Now run away, that's a man. Come away in, Mr. M'Phail.'

'Catharine,' said Mr. Carmichael, 'the minister says the Fitzgeralds are come. You'll need to go and see them.'

'Indeed? Have you seen the Ardvoira people, Mr. M'Phail?'

'I will haf seen the young Laird,' answered the old minister,—'and he iss a fine yowth.'

'Yes, yes, a very nice lad,' said Mrs. Carmichael, 'but have his family arrived?'

This question caused the old man some perplexity, but on its being repeated in various keys by both his host and hostess, they at last learnt that 'young Ardvoira's father and his mother, and aal his family, and his men-servants and his women-servants and his kists,' had undoubtedly been seen to disembark at Ardvoira pier the preceding evening.

'You'll need to go and see them this afternoon, Catharine,' repeated Mr. Carmichael.

'Tuts!' said his wife, putting another wing of chicken on the minister's plate—'I'm not going to call upon people before they're unpacked.'

Her husband, however, nothing daunted, continued to offer the same suggestion at intervals all through luncheon, concluding with the remark, 'Very uncivil not to go and see them when you know they're there.'

'Well, go and call yourself,' retorted his wife, 'and I am sure they'll wish you at the back of beyond.'

As Mr. Carmichael had never been known to call upon any one in his life, except upon the most urgent business, this repartee was rather a symptom of yielding on his wife's part.

The minister, after fortifying himself with a pinch of snuff, now observed that he had had a 'fery handsome dinner,' and intimated further that 'this feesit was the commainment of his yearly diet of feesitation.' His hostess, understanding this speech to be indicative of a desire to offer up a prayer in the kitchen, at once conducted the aged pastor thither, and summoned the household. This done, she returned to her husband, observing—

‘That poor old man gets dirtier every day—he’s a perfect disgrace to be seen. What’s that woman of his thinking of that she doesn’t take and wash him?’

Mr. Carmichael agreed in lamenting with her the minister’s somewhat unsavoury condition, adding, that it was a poor return for the expense to which the heritors had lately been put in supplying the manse with water.

‘Poor’ old body! I’ll tell you what, James,’ said Mrs. Carmichael, after a short pause for reflection, ‘I *will* call at Ardvoira to-day, if you’ll order the carriage. And I’ll take him with me, and drop him at the manse; he’s not fit for those long travels on his feet.’

Accordingly Mrs. Carmichael, having changed her everyday dress, and put on her best bonnet and cloak, set forth, accompanied by the minister, and by little Hughie, who was also, his grandmother said, ‘better off his feet.’

There had been rain during the night, and a touch of sharpness in the air gave the first signs of the approach of autumn. The sun shone brightly, and the loch was blue, flecked over with little white waves; the opposite hills were distinct and clear. The breeze swept over the hills, bringing out all their wild sweet scents; the flowers were at their best and gayest, heather and bluebells and golden-rod, and the patches of deep green bracken were beginning to turn a golden brown. Lower down, the sweet bog-myrtle grew thickly, mixed with starry white grass of Parnassus and the orange seeds of the bog asphodel.

‘Jump out and ring the bell, Hughie,’ said Mrs. Carmichael when they reached Ardvoira, ‘and see that you behave yourself, now, and speak when you are spoken to.’

Thus admonished, her grandson, climbing upon the scraper and seizing the bell with both hands, rang a peal which quickly brought the astonished man-servant to the door. In answer to Mrs. Carmichael’s question, he replied that he did not know whether her ladyship was at home, but would inquire. In a few minutes, however, she was admitted, and welcomed with great cordiality by Lady Eleanor, who well remembered her kind old friend, and longed for somebody to whom she might pour out her grievances.

'So good of you to come, dear Mrs. Carmichael,' said she. 'You find us in a shocking state of disrepair. The journey in itself was enough to knock one up, and then the worries I have gone through with servants and luggage, and Frederick being ill and no doctor!'

'I am sorry to hear Mr. Fitzgerald is ill.'

'Oh, he is never well, and he is such a bad traveller. He will get over it; but, my dear Mrs. Carmichael, just fancy this! The cook who came with us yesterday has been in bed ever since—says the air of the Highlands does not suit her—and the consequence is, we must do all the work ourselves, I suppose. It is fortunate I brought Elsie—oh, by the way, you know Elsie Ross? such a nice girl——'

'I knew her as a child,' interrupted Mrs. Carmichael, 'my daughter Isabella was very fond of her. I heard she was coming with you.'

'Well, you shall see her by and by, but about the cook, what do you advise? I don't like to send her straight back, poor thing, she was so highly recommended, and she does make excellent clear soup.'

'An inquiry into the cook's symptoms now took place, and from this the talk diverged to diseases in general, and thence to all the deaths which had taken place in the two ladies' acquaintance since they last met.

Mrs. Carmichael's kindly sympathy led her friend on to talk of David, who had been a frequent guest at Glen Torran in former days.

'It is very trying for me to come here, very!' said Lady Eleanor, drying her eyes; 'it is for Lionel's sake I do it. I could not have faced it without Elsie, but to make those two dear children happy is all I live for now.'

Mrs. Carmichael looked at her in some astonishment. 'Is Lionel?—I always understood——' She hesitated.

'Yes, Elsie was engaged to my poor David,' replied Lady Eleanor. 'I never thought them suited, and I don't believe the child knew her own mind, but I am the last person to throw obstacles in the way of any one's happiness. Many mothers, I daresay, would have different views

for their sons, but Lionel is all I have now, and if his heart is set on this—— For my part, I don't approve of worldly, ambitious marriages. I don't think they are right.'

She shook her head in a chastened manner, and rose from her seat. 'Now I should really like to show you the house,' she said, 'and see what you think can be done about the game larder; it is *so* inconvenient, and I expect a party next month.' She led the way downstairs. Little Hughie, in obedience to a sign from his grandmother, had long since left the room, and the sound of his voice, which seemed to issue from a dark passage, made her pause on her way to the larder.

'Ah!' said Lady Eleanor, 'your little grandson has found his way to the store-room. He is quite safe, Elsie will take charge of him. You would like to speak to Elsie—will you come in here?'

It was a large light store-room into which Lady Eleanor conducted her visitor. Elsie, with her sleeves tucked up, and a holland apron tied round her, was kneeling on the floor, surrounded by numerous brown paper packages, which Katie, a stout-armed Highland lass, was putting away under her directions.

Hughie, perched upon a flour-barrel, with his little legs crossed, was complacently munching an apple, while he gave his opinion from time to time on the quality of the goods which were being unpacked, or addressed searching questions to Katie respecting the young man he had seen her walking with on Sunday.

'My dear, I will not disturb you,' said Mrs. Carmichael, after Elsie had been introduced to her; 'you seem to be in your work. I remember you so well at Drumsheugh when you were a little girl.' She held Elsie's hand, and patted it kindly. 'Don't let that little smout be a trouble to you,' she said smiling at Hughie as she went away.

'Yes, a remarkably pretty girl,' she said when she was alone with Lady Eleanor; 'but—my dear, excuse me—don't let her wear herself to death. She doesn't look to me strong.'

'No,' said Lady Eleanor, not in the least offended, 'I

don't think she is—none of us are strong ; and of course all this is a great fatigue. I should not be surprised if she were laid up—not the least ; and I am the worst person in the world to look after any one who is delicate.'

'Oh no ! the Highland air is a fine thing ; and it does a girl no harm to have something to do ; but that child wants feeding up.'

'Indeed she does,' said Lady Eleanor, 'the misfortune is that we have no cook ; but Elsie is always slight, and her figure is round if you come to look at it. I was much thinner as a girl ; indeed, before I married, the doctors thought I was going into a decline.'

There was no more to be said ; but when Elsie and Hughie, after a course of washing and brushing, presented themselves in the drawing-room, Mrs. Carmichael spoke affectionately to the girl, pressed her to come often to Glen Torran, and when she left, insisted on taking her in the carriage as far as the shore, that the salt breezes might blow some colour into her pale cheeks.

CHAPTER III.

‘Die Welt treibt fort ihr Wesen,
Die Leute kommen und gehn,
Als wärest du nie gewesen,
Als wäre nichts geschehn,
Wie selin’ ich mich aufs neue
Hinaus in Wald und Flur!
Oh ich mich gräm’, mich freue,
Du bleibst mir treu, Natur.’

THE domestic difficulties at Ardvoira were gradually smoothed over. The cook recovered, so did Mr. Fitzgerald. Nearly a fortnight had passed since their arrival, and Elsie had grown accustomed to her surroundings. She had grown to love the place for its own sake as well as for David’s, and its beauty gave her intense, though melancholy pleasure. She could scarcely bear the thought of leaving it, even to go home, though she felt that it was time her visit came to an end. Lionel contrived to be constantly with her: whether she climbed the hill, or wandered on the shore, or went into the garden or up the glen, he was sure to appear, and linger with her till the last possible moment. He never said a word which could give her pain, and was always most thoughtful and gentle with her, but she could not help feeling that for his sake, if for no other reason, it would be better she should go. She therefore told Lady Eleanor that she must go to Rossie the following week, adhering to her resolution in spite of all opposition.

‘Really, Elsie, it is very hard upon me,’ said Lady Eleanor. ‘If you go, I shall have to entertain all those dreadful creatures by myself. And you were beginning to

look so well ! why, at first people thought I overworked you, and they may think so still if you don't get more colour. I should not wonder, now, if they did. I think it very likely.'

'Nobody could possibly think so,' replied Elsie; 'but indeed, Lady Eleanor, I must go. Think ! I have not seen my father for five years and a half.'

'Well, of course if you put it in that way ; but I believe, Elsie, it is nothing but obstinacy ; and say what you will, obstinacy is a very bad feature in any character.'

She continued to lament over the arrival of her guests, and the fatigues which she would have to undergo on their account, till Elsie began to think herself the most selfish of mortals.

'You will have Blanche,' she suggested faintly, 'and Constance.'

'Blanche !' said Lady Eleanor with withering scorn. 'Now, I ask you, Elsie, of what use is Blanche likely to be?'

'I like Blanche,' said Elsie. 'We have become great friends now.'

'Friends ! I daresay—but as to her being the smallest use to me—— ! That girl,' she continued in a tragic tone, 'does nothing—absolutely nothing, except please herself. She will lecture about Buddhism, or any of her ridiculous views by the hour together—of course every one is very much bored. *She* does not care, and she will not even talk to any one she does not fancy. You may call that *haut ton* if you like ; I think it positively wrong. And as for Constance——' she paused expressively.

'I have not seen Constance since she was married,' said Elsie.

'Then you have missed seeing a most degrading spectacle.'

'What !' said Elsie, opening her eyes.

'Call it what you please,' said Lady Eleanor, leaning back and fanning herself. 'A woman who spoils her husband to that extent, is to me absolutely revolting. You have seen Douglas Ferrars—is he a man before whom anybody could fall down flat? Commonplace to the last

degree ! And you remember Constance—a girl you would not have expected to give up her own way very readily ? I never admired her much myself, but she had a good deal of style undoubtedly, and now she has utterly lost any looks she ever had. Grovelling at the feet of that man ! I have no patience with her.’

‘Do tell me about it, Lady Eleanor,’ said Elsie, much interested. ‘Does he order her about, or what ?’

‘Oh, I can’t describe it to you,’ said Lady Eleanor, rising off her chair. ‘It is indescribable !’

The subject apparently ruffled her ; she left the room, closing the door with a slight bang.

This conversation took place in the evening, and the post next day brought Elsie a letter from her father which caused her much disquiet. Little Patrick (or Peter, as he was generally called), the elder of the twins, had taken scarlet fever. It was a mild case, but as Elsie had never had the fever, her father entirely declined receiving her at Rossie ; she must ‘put off her time somewhere’ until all danger of infection was past.

‘Oh, well then, Elsie,’ said Lady Eleanor, when this letter was read to her, ‘you will stay on here and help me with my company. How fortunate the child took it when he did, and not later. Do not look so anxious, my dear ; children always take these complaints, and get over them all right.’

‘It is not that,’ said Elsie, ‘but poor Euphemia ! I think I ought to go and help her to nurse him—I never take infection.’

‘Now you are quite silly, Elsie, and I am sure Mrs. Carmichael, who is a sensible woman, will say the same’ (they were going to luncheon at Glen Torran). ‘Frederick ! here is Elsie wishing to go and catch scarlet fever.’

‘Indeed !’ said Mr. Fitzgerald, who had a great dread of infection, looking round in alarm. ‘Scarlet fever ! where ? how ? what ?’

‘Oh, not here,’ said his wife, ‘and I don’t mean to let her go. Come, Elsie, and get ready for Glen Torran.’

Mrs. Carmichael likewise treated with disdain the idea of Elsie's going to nurse her little brother.

'It would be a tempting of Providence,' said that lady. 'And when her father, honest man, does not even want her! Make your mind easy, Elsie, my dear, and come and visit me when you are wearied of Ardvoira.'

'But I can't spare her, Mrs. Carmichael,' said Lady Eleanor. 'Do try and look a little cheerful, Elsie, it is very good for you not to have your own way in everything. You were really beginning to get too independent.'

'Indeed, Lady Eleanor, said Elsie, 'I am only too glad—in a way—to stay, and of course I will, as you and Mrs. Carmichael are both so kind as to say so.'

Thus it was settled that Elsie must remain at Ardvoira, and she could only hope, to use her own words to herself, that Lionel would 'take no harm.' He was going to the Oban meeting before long, that was one comfort; and when he returned he would bring friends with him, while other guests were expected from England; so the constant *tête-à-têtes* must come to an end. In her secret heart too, Elsie could not help being glad of the reprieve; so she put all doubts out of her mind, and exerted herself to take part in the conversation.

'And so you are to have a house-full, Lady Eleanor,' said Mr. Carmichael, who always thirsted for information about his neighbour's doings. 'I hear you are to entertain the whole country-side.'

'I am afraid I shall do nothing so praiseworthy, Mr. Carmichael. My guests will be chiefly my own relations from England, and Lionel will bring my nephew Lord Heathfield and a friend, back from Oban with him.'

'Oh! he is to be with the M'Nab party at Oban, I hear.'

'I think—yes—some people of that name,' said Lady Eleanor, with a little inflexion of scorn in her voice. 'I know nothing about them—Lionel picked them up somewhere.'

Mr. Carmichael laughed heartily, with a thorough en-

joyment of the joke which Lady Eleanor failed to understand. She looked inquiringly at his wife, who said, 'Yes, he is very rude. James, do you hear? you are very rude to Lady Eleanor. But mercy me, my dear! don't go about saying you know nothing about the M'Nabs. They're the M'Nabs of Auchlenbothlie, to say nothing of Meish, Neish, and Scoura. You mustn't take *their* name in vain.'

'It's a dreadful name,' said Lady Eleanor somewhat sullenly.

'They were a dreadful clan in old days, I fancy,' said Mrs. Carmichael; 'and they let nobody forget it now, if they can help it. They are cousins of yours, I think—at anyrate of yours, Elsie. Are not you related to the Stewarts of Knockbrichachan?'

'Yes,' said Elsie, 'I met a lady once—a Mrs. Macdonald-Smith, who was a Stewart by birth, and said she was my cousin.'

'Well, those M'Nabs,' said Mrs. Carmichael impressively, 'are the only people the Knockbrichachans can marry without lowering themselves.'

Elsie laughed. 'It is fortunate then,' said she, 'that there are such people, else the Knockbrichachans would have to remain unmarried, I suppose. But by the way, Mr. Macdonald-Smith——'

'That was her second husband, my dear! of course she married a M'Nab to begin with. Oh, and besides the Macdonalds of Ardvoira! why, they are descended from the old Lords of the Isles that you read about in history—but they are nothing to the M'Nabs for all that.'

Mrs. Carmichael said all this with a twinkle in her eye, but Elsie saw that Lady Eleanor was a little annoyed; she disliked jokes and saw no sense in them.

A day or two later Lionel departed for Oban. He went with great reluctance; and his mother, after her visit to Glen Torran, treated him with marked coldness, in order to show him that she disapproved of his going at all, since he was to associate with the M'Nabs, whose very existence had become an offence to her, although she never men-

tioned the obnoxious name, or alluded to them in the most distant manner.

He was not many days away, and Elsie's little time of peace passed only too swiftly. The party was expected on the morrow, and she exerted herself to make Ardvoira look its best and brightest. She ransacked the garden for flowers, and brought in what she could; a few rain-washed carnations and sweet peas, china roses, and a store of beautiful Japanese anemones, both white and pink; and from outside she brought stag's horn moss and bog myrtle, late-flowering honeysuckle, and yellow and crimson bramble leaves; and ivy and rowan berries to deck the dinner table.

'Don't tire yourself, child,' said Lady Eleanor, 'or you will be as white as a sheet, and Lionel will think it is my fault; besides it is so unbecoming. What have you brought to wear in the morning? I am tired of looking at that brown homespun.'

Elsie laid down her flowers, and began to reckon up her dresses upon her fingers. 'There is the black cashmere that I wore on Sunday; and my gray with the corduroy skirt; and my blue serge; and my white serge; and my——'

'Oh, well, I daresay you have enough; but I never heard of the white serge before. Put it on! I want to see how you look in it.'

Elsie left her flowers reluctantly and went.

'That is lovely!' said Lady Eleanor when she reappeared. 'That gold-brown embroidery is simply perfect— isn't it, Frederick? and yet the dress is so simply made. Turn round—let Frederick see the back.'

Mr. Fitzgerald, who was a connoisseur in ladies' dresses, expressed his unqualified approval.

'Now be sure you wear it, Elsie,' said Lady Eleanor. 'Why keep your clothes boxed up until they are out of fashion?'

'It is scarcely suitable for a Highland place,' said Elsie. 'One scrambles about, you know, and it will get so dirty.'

'Nonsense! put it on on Sunday then. You don't scramble to church, I suppose.'

Lionel, with Lord Heathfield and Mr. Hargrave, had met his cousins at Oban. They had preferred to take that route, in order to avoid the longer sea voyage, and also that they might visit Edinburgh and see something of Scottish scenery on their way.

At length word was brought that the steamer was in sight, boats were put out, and the Ardvaira party went down to the shore to meet their guests as they landed. There they came! two boatloads of them; Lionel first, looking very brown and handsome, and happy to be at home again; next Lord Heathfield, with his faultless collar and beautifully brushed hair; Constance Ferrars and her husband; and Blanche Mortimer, who accepted, though rather disdainfully, the assistance of Charles Hargrave, her *fiancé*.

The first greetings past, Blanche turned from him, and hastily put her arm through Elsie's. 'I am thankful to arrive,' she said, 'you have no idea what a bore they all are. They have dragged me all the way round by Oban—to see Scotland forsooth! as if I had not seen it fifty times. It drives me perfectly frantic to be turned into a common tourist to please Douglas Ferrars.'

Blanche entertained the most cordial contempt for her brother-in-law, which she was at no pains to conceal.

Lionel, foiled in his attempts to talk to Elsie, now addressed himself to his mother.

'The M'Nabs were very kind and hospitable,' said he, 'but I am not sorry to get back. They have got a capital yacht; and I have asked young M'Nab and his sister to come in it next week, and stay a day or two.'

Lady Eleanor's brow clouded; she gave her son no sign that she had heard him, but went on with what she was saying to Lord Heathfield.

After a glance at his mother's face, Lionel did not repeat his remark; he began to whistle, and was fain to walk behind with Charles Hargrave, whose countenance, always rather melancholy, bore traces of extra depression.

As the party reached the house, Lady Eleanor drew Elsie aside and said confidentially, 'Lionel has invited some of his M'Nabs.'

'You don't say so!' said Elsie. 'How many?'

'Two,' said Lady Eleanor, 'a man and a woman. I shall give them the worst rooms in the house.'

CHAPTER IV.

'Of all the Highland clans
M'Nab is most ferocious ;
Except the M'Intyres,
M'Craws and M'Intoshes.'

THERE was a considerable element of truth in the account which Lady Eleanor had given to Elsie of her nieces. Both Constance and Blanche were greatly changed since the days when we first met them at Alkerton, whether for the better or the worse it is difficult to say. Since her marriage Constance Ferrars had almost entirely laid aside her disagreeably supercilious manner ; on the other hand she had become somewhat commonplace and uninteresting. Her husband was one who professed to admire good house-keeping in his wife rather than good looks ; accordingly Constance, neglecting her outward appearance, threw her whole soul into the management of her house and servants. Though she no longer cared to assert her superiority, her sense of her own importance was by no means lessened ; hence her own affairs and those of her husband formed her constant theme of discourse, which was apt at times to weary the patience of her friends.

It need hardly be said that Blanche was no longer disposed to follow her sister's lead, she would have been highly indignant had it been suggested that she followed the lead of any one ; she had 'views' of her own, and a soul which despised the ordinary lot of women. Of men too, she had a very poor opinion, 'idle, selfish creatures,' she would say, 'thinking of nothing but sport and pleasure, and without any high feelings or aspirations.' In spite, however, of her

contempt for the male sex, Blanche liked admiration, of which she received a good share; for though without regular features, she was very handsome on a large scale, and looked the picture of health and vigour. She was now engaged to Mr. Charles Hargrave, who was the eldest son of the managing partner in the great brewing firm of Hopwood and Hargrave, at Stourton, S——shire. This young gentleman had become attached to Blanche perhaps from force of contrast; he was gentlemanlike and refined in appearance, and somewhat delicate in health, which lent an air of interesting languor to his large blue eyes, and slight, rather stooping figure. He was a kindly, well-disposed young man, not perhaps overburthened with brains; and Blanche had a real regard for him, though few men would have borne as he did with all her tempers and caprices.

Lady Eleanor troubled herself little about her nieces and their affairs; she pursued her own way, and was seldom seen in the drawing-room before luncheon. Elsie found herself in continual demand; she had to listen to Constance whenever Mr. Ferrars did not claim his wife's attention; she held long arguments with Blanche, and was the repository of all that young woman's confidences; she had to soothe Charles Hargrave as often as he was driven to desperation by his lady-love's ill-humour; and she had to pay polite attention to Lord Heathfield, who was always ready to give her instruction. Amidst all these claims she had little time to bestow on Lionel—poor Lionel, who had grown so kind and gentle, and who waited so patiently for his opportunities, now few and far between, of speaking to her. Yes, upon the whole Elsie was glad she had not gone to Rossie; she was certainly of use to Lady Eleanor, and all would yet go well. Perhaps, after all, she had been mistaken about Lionel; he did treat her much more like a sister, and when he took her aside it was to consult her about household matters, or to plan some expedition for the entertainment of his guests.

A few fine days alternated with many wet ones, in which the ladies necessarily remained a good deal indoors. The weather had 'broken' earlier than usual, the inhabitants

said ; but as this remark was repeated every year about the same time, it had lost a little of its significance.

‘Well, what have you been doing?’ said Blanche, as two of the sportsmen came in, wet and rather dispirited, one afternoon.

The incessant rain was blowing in sheets past the window, blotting out the distant hills ; upon the nearer ones hung an ominous little wreath of mist ; the colours of sky, sea, and land seemed blurred and mixed together into one dull shade of gray. Blanche was sitting on a low seat by the fire, studying a book of Celtic inscriptions and antiquities of the neighbourhood, in order thoroughly to get up the subject, as it was proposed to make an excursion the first fine day to an old chapel on a neighbouring island.

‘Where are the others?’ she said, ‘and how many grouse have you shot?’

‘Lionel has not come in yet,’ replied Charles Hargrave, stretching out his cold hands to the fire, ‘and Heathfield has gone to change his clothes. We did not shoot grouse at all ; we shot snipe and a few rabbits—did not you hear those shots as we came in?’

‘Douglas dear, do go and change your clothes,’ said Constance, feeling her husband’s trousers anxiously. ‘You are wet through, and will certainly get a return of your lumbago.’

Mr. Ferrars departed, muttering some imprecations upon the climate, and Charley Hargrave was about to follow when Blanche detained him.

‘Tell us something interesting,’ said she, ‘you are very dull company, after all. Did you shoot well?’

‘Not very,’ was the reply. ‘Three of us fired at the same rabbit as we came in—you must have heard the shots.’

‘I am disappointed in you, Charles,’ said Blanche, turning away. ‘Why don’t you kill things for yourself instead of shooting other people’s dead rabbits? Yes, you may go and change your clothes,’ and Blanche resettled herself to her studies.

Presently the door opened again and in came Lionel, with muddy boots and clothes and hair glistening with rain-drops, but with an air of having enjoyed himself, quite different from the other two.

'Lionel, don't sit down!' cried his mother, suddenly starting up from her novel as her son entered. 'You will ruin the furniture.'

Lionel glanced down at his wet clothes, and stood with his back against the mantelpiece, smiling down upon the company serenely. 'Is it near dinner-time?' said he. 'The intelligent observer may discover, even in this room, that we are going to have curry for dinner.'

'You need not tell us that, Lionel,' said Lady Eleanor crossly. 'Have we not been sitting here smelling it the whole afternoon? There is nothing more disgusting than a house which smells of cooking.'

No one had observed the odour until Lionel opened the door, but at these words each one sniffed the air and shook his or her head mournfully; Constance alone smiled a contented smile. 'Douglas likes curry,' she murmured. 'Aunt Eleanor, *where* do you get your curry-powder?'

Lady Eleanor turned her eyes vacantly upon Constance and answered, 'I'm sure I don't know, my dear. Lionel, how your clothes smell of rabbits and—dogs! Why are you not like your cousin Basil? he went and changed directly—and here he is,' as Lord Heathfield, looking particularly clean and dry, walked in, and, placing himself on a comfortable chair by Elsie's side, began to converse with her about poetry in a low voice. Lionel eyed his cousin with as much contempt as he was capable of calling into his countenance; and his mother was again about to make some remark when she was interrupted by Constance, whose mind was still running upon Indian condiments.

'Douglas used to get a box of curry-powder and chutney and sauces direct from India every year. He got it through a friend, and now—is it not provoking?—the friend is dead, so he can't get any more. Where do you advise me to go? You can't get those things thoroughly good at the Army and Navy.'

'How does the sea affect you?' inquired Heathfield of Elsie.

'It only affects me when it is rough,' she answered, wondering why Lord Heathfield should pause in the middle of a poetical discourse to ask her if she was liable to sea-sickness.

Heathfield looked a little puzzled. 'To me,' he said, 'it appeals at all times. The violence of the storm, the boom of the waves on a rock-bound shore, may stir up strong emotion; yet even in tranquillity it is ever varied. Do you remember those lines of Wordsworth—

"The gentleness of heaven is on the sea :
Listen ! the mighty being is awake,
And doth with his eternal motion make
A sound like thunder—everlastingly."

'Oh yes ! I understand,' said Elsie. 'I thought you meant—oh yes ! I do prefer a calm infinitely, every one must, I think, who has lived by the sea, and who really knows it.'

'Why don't you write poetry yourself, Heathfield?' said Lionel sarcastically. 'A sonnet now—on the sea by moonlight—a most original subject; or an ode to Punctuality.'

'Don't tease him, Lionel,' said Blanche, in a tone of elder-sisterly admonition.

'Well, I'll go and change,' said Lionel, feeling that Heathfield, who was allowed to sit down, had decidedly the best of it; and he departed, while Elsie's eyes followed him wistfully. He had come in so pleasant and cheerful, and everybody had snubbed him; and now he had gone away displeased, and probably would not get over it the whole evening, and though a kind word from her would put him right, it would be better not to speak it; he might think—he might fancy she meant more—and once again Elsie heartily wished herself at home.

The rain beat, and the wind howled all night; and the next morning there was no change in the prospect.

'The M'Nabs will never come in such weather,' said Elsie soothingly to Lady Eleanor.

'They are capable of anything,' returned her hostess gloomily.

The gentlemen of the party did not go out that morning; they remained, some in the drawing-room, and some in the smoking-room, according to their several tastes. Mr. Fitzgerald and Lady Eleanor retired to the library; Constance disappeared at a call from her husband; Lionel came into the drawing-room, but finding that Heathfield had established himself in his favourite chair, and proposed to read aloud to the ladies, he withdrew sulkily, and was presently seen going out, solitary, in the rain.

Charley Hargrave also came into the drawing-room, and sat waiting, rather impatiently, for the reading to cease, that he might talk to Blanche, and looking out of the window. A sudden exclamation from him made everybody look up.

'Actually a vessel on the loch! Can that be the M'Nabs' yacht?'

There could be no doubt about it; it was a large steam yacht, and was making straight for the landing-place. Lionel had seen it also, and had gone down to the shore. Elsie was on her way to tell Lady Eleanor when she caught sight of Neil, the page-boy, hurrying up from the shore, and went to meet him.

'What is it, Neil? have Mr. and Miss M'Nab come?'

'Please, ma'am, I was to tell her ladyship that they will be come, and four more pairsons forbye.'

'What?' said Elsie, in great consternation. 'Tell me who are come, Neil.'

'There will be Captain M'Nab and Mistress M'Nab, and young Mr. M'Nab and three young ladees, and they will aal be wushin' to sleep in the hoose,' replied Neil, appearing to breathe more freely after he had delivered his message without a mistake.

Elsie broke the news to Lady Eleanor as best she might. It was perfectly true; six dripping forms were presently seen accompanying Lionel up the approach, followed at a little distance by two more, who proved to be a lady's-maid and a piper, without whom the M'Nabs never stirred abroad.

'But it is monstrous!' said Lady Eleanor. 'It is incredible! I cannot have them in the house. Frederick, do you not see those people? Go out at once—quick, and tell them to go away.'

'But, my dear Eleanor, it—it is raining.'

'Never mind the rain! go at once—go quickly and speak to them.'

Mr. Fitzgerald went helplessly to the door; Elsie followed him with an umbrella.

'Lady Eleanor will be quite glad to see them,' she said, 'but please make a sign to Lionel to speak to us.'

Mr. Fitzgerald only groaned, but was presently seen shaking hands all round with apparent cordiality.

In another minute Lionel darted in. 'Mother, this is rather an invasion,' said he hastily; 'but you will be able to put them up somehow? They were on their way south, and were driven in by the storm. We must keep them till it is over.'

'Put them up!' said Lady Eleanor. 'It is perfectly impossible to put them up, Lionel, and I don't know what you mean—you are most inconsiderate. You must go and tell them I won't have them in the house.'

'But you *must* have them in the house,' said Lionel, with decision. 'One could not turn a dog out of doors in such weather; and they are wet through.' He glanced at Elsie, who came forward.

'Lady Eleanor, I am sure we could manage,' she said. 'I have been thinking it over, and you shall have no trouble. I could sleep with Blanche——'

'And two of them could sleep in the library,' put in Lionel unluckily.

'They can *not* sleep in the library,' retorted his mother, turning upon him. 'Is the house to be made into a pigsty because a company of—mountebanks choose to arrive in a yacht?'

'I don't know, and it doesn't matter,' said Lionel, doggedly. 'Somebody can have my room of course; but to talk of sending them away is common nonsense. Come, mother.'

'Well, it is your house, do as you please of course,' said Lady Eleanor suddenly. 'Elsie, I leave it to you since you seem so confident; it is quite beyond me, I confess,' and her ladyship walked with dignity to the door.

The guests had by this time reached the hall, and were stripping off their saturated cloaks and great-coats. Captain M'Nab, who had got rid of his, quickly advanced with a bow.

'Indeed I consider this a most fortunate meeting; I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Lady Eleanor,' he said, in answer to her polite expressions of regret at their half-drowned condition. 'My wife'—indicating a middle-aged lady in a billycock hat and an ulster—'my daughters—Miss Williams, my daughters' charming friend—and my son, Roderick. I fear our numbers must have taken you by surprise, but my friend Lionel would take no refusal.'

'I told you we were intruding, Hector,' said Mrs. M'Nab, who looked very cross.

'No intrusion in the world,' said Lady Eleanor, 'I am only sorry that our room is limited.'

'Oh! we are easily accommodated,' cried Captain M'Nab. 'I was sure you would be delighted to see us—I told my wife so. Highland hospitality, you know.'

Here Elsie and Lionel came in together, and suggested dry clothes, an offer which was gladly accepted by all. The luggage not having been brought up from the yacht, Blanche and Elsie were obliged to ransack their wardrobes for garments in which to array their guests, and Lady Eleanor sent her own maid with a dress for Mrs. M'Nab, which was however declined, as that lady's strong ulster had protected her tolerably well. Elsie had given up her room to accommodate the Misses M'Nab, and the girls assembling there, a general trying on of dresses took place.

It was impossible to be stiff or disdainful under the circumstances, and even Blanche joined in the laughter. Miss Ethel Williams, who was extremely small and fairy-like in figure, looked very comical in one of Elsie's dresses,

which was much too long for her. Annie M'Nab, who was iniddle-sized and commonplace, was able to put on another, although it was rather tight; while Flora, the elder sister, a stout, handsome, broad-shouldered girl, managed, after great difficulty, to struggle into one belonging to Blanche, not without a considerable loss of buttons and hooks.

'It is too bad,' said Blanche, as she and Elsie repaired to the room they were to share together, 'to have them bursting all our best gowns. Did you ever see such a collection of monsters?'

'What *shall* we do with them?' said Elsie disconsolately, looking out of the window at the rain.

'Never mind them just now—they seem very well able to take care of themselves. What do you think of them, Elsie? what is your opinion of your countrywomen?'

'Mrs. M'Nab is not my countrywoman,' said Elsie quickly; 'I am sure she is English by her voice. But the girls—how exactly like her father Miss Flora is. I daresay *some* people might call her handsome.'

'She has a good deal of side on,' said Blanche. 'Did you see how she squares her elbows? The other one is nothing at all.'

'No, she is plain, though I like her face better than her sister's. But that little Miss Williams is pretty, very piquant-looking; she is a Welsh girl, Lionel says.'

'Did Lionel appear to take much interest in her?' inquired Blanche drily. 'I *thought* I saw her rolling her eyes whilst he was helping her off with her coat.'

'Oh, I daresay she is quite that sort of girl,' said Elsie. 'Luckily, there are a good many young men here, so that she will be amused.'

'If she thinks we are going to lend her our young men to roll her eyes at, as well as our clothes to spoil, she will find herself very much mistaken,' said Blanche indignantly. 'Just you keep your eye on Lionel, Elsie, and stand no nonsense—that is my advice.'

'But I want Lionel to marry; I would like him to fall in love with some nice girl,' said Elsie earnestly.

‘Do you want him to fall in love with Ethel Williams before your very eyes? answer me that.’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘I thought not. Not that I think there is much danger of it,’ said Blanche kindly, ‘but “Highland hospitality” may be carried too far. We shall have to go down—there is the gong for luncheon.’

CHAPTER V.

' You shall not exist
For another day more ;
I will shoot you, sir,
Or stab you with my claymore !'

THE M'Nabs did not take long to make themselves at home, and were disposed to be pleasant and talkative. Captain M'Nab, who had been a naval officer, was a lively, energetic little man, youthful-looking and rather handsome. He was full of good humour, praised the dishes at table, complimented his hostess, and poured forth one anecdote after another for the enlivenment of the company. His wife was severe, not to say forbidding in appearance ; she spoke little, her eyes were constantly upon her daughters ; she was civil to Lady Eleanor and smiled upon Lionel, but snubbed Blanche or Elsie as often as they ventured to speak to her. Her son was a heavy-looking youth of seventeen or eighteen ; he spoke no word, good or bad, but stared at Ethel Williams with light blue lack-lustre eyes. Flora M'Nab was frank and handsome, affecting a gentlemanly deportment ; she leaned back in her chair, laughed loudly, and used a good many slang words. Ethel Williams, on the contrary, complained of fatigue, spoke in a faint voice, and refused to eat ; but was not too much exhausted to carry on a low-toned conversation with her next neighbour, Lord Heathfield, to whom she lifted her beautiful appealing eyes in a way which made havoc in the heart of that susceptible young nobleman.

The afternoon passed rather heavily ; the guests sat round, looking at one another and at their hosts as if they

expected some entertainment to have been provided, but none was forthcoming. Lady Eleanor, with her stateliest air, was making conversation to Mrs. M'Nab; Constance Ferrars retired to her room; Blanche buried herself in a book, and took no notice of any one; Elsie alone was affected by the depression of her guests. To raise their spirits she told them that a servants' ball was in preparation in the barn for the following evening, and that all would be expected to dance at it; but as to-morrow night was in the distance, this news was received with only a faint show of interest.

Flora M'Nab jumped up noisily, squared her elbow and pointed her toe as if about to dance; then catching Ethel Williams round the waist, she began to whistle the tune of a schottische, and to prance about. Lady Eleanor turned her head with an expression of dignified surprise, and the girls stopped, feeling uncomfortable. Elsie proposed some music.

'Oh! I wonder if Ethel's fiddle has come up from the yacht,' said Flora. 'Just run and see, Annie, will you?'

Annie went obediently, and Flora, sitting down to the piano with a yawn, began to play a waltz, carelessly, and with a good many wrong notes. She broke off abruptly in the middle.

'I have forgotten the rest, she said,' and I have not got my music. Oh! dear me'—with another yawn—'can you play, Miss Ross?'

'No, I am sorry I can't,' replied Elsie. 'Are you fond of music?'

Flora only nodded, and Ethel Williams, turning up her eyes, said 'I adore it.'

'Blanche, do come and sing us something,' said Elsie.

'Sing? oh, don't ask me, Elsie. One cannot sing to order, and I am not in the humour just now.'

'Here, Ethel, is your violin,' said Annie entering. 'I hope it has taken no harm—the case was rather wet.'

Ethel received it in silence; she seldom wasted words upon her own sex. She opened the case, took out the instrument, and began to tune it, making such excruciating sounds that Blanche and Elsie were tempted to put

their fingers in their ears, and Lady Eleanor felt that this was not to be borne.

'Would you rather we went into the library, Mrs. M'Nab?' said she.

Mrs. M'Nab replied that she was quite comfortable where she was.

'It is unfortunate,' said Lady Eleanor, rising, 'but I have a dislike—a constitutional dislike, to hearing a violin tuned. We cannot account for or control those nervous feelings. But pray remain here if you prefer it.'

Mrs. M'Nab thought it best to follow, and the two ladies retired to the library. Blanche presently beat a retreat to her own room, and after what seemed to Elsie an interminable time the gentlemen came in and the strangers began to recover something like animation. Lord Heathfield at once made his way to Miss Williams's side; and Lionel, sitting down to the piano, played till tea was announced, and they all adjourned to the library. Afterwards, the rain having ceased, he proposed a walk, which was agreed to with alacrity, only Lord Heathfield and Miss Williams preferring to remain indoors.

It transpired during the walk that the M'Nab party intended to stay at Ardvoira till Saturday, the day of their arrival being Thursday. Captain M'Nab again made some slight apology for their numbers.

'But,' said he, 'the weather is more likely to be settled by Saturday, and now we are in such good quarters I—I assure you we are in no hurry to move. The more the merrier, eh, Lionel? and I am sure no one could have better fare.'

Lionel, who had to sleep in the yacht, was not particularly overjoyed at the prospect of spending two nights there; however, he entreated Captain M'Nab to consult his own convenience entirely, which that gentleman, with much earnestness, pledged himself to do. He walked alongside of Lionel, and confided to him many interesting particulars respecting his family.

'It is curious,' said he, 'but my wife now—she is of no birth—none at all.'

'Indeed I' said Lionel. 'You astonish me.'

Captain M'Nab regarded him sternly.

'Naturally,' said he, 'you are surprised. Had I considered my personal feelings—but I sacrificed them to duty. I trampled them under foot.'

'What circumstances,' asked Lionel, maintaining his gravity by an effort, 'could have made such a duty necessary?'

'Ah, my young friend, you may well ask! The M'Nabs were not what they once were. Our lands have been taken from us—at least they would have been, if I had not——'

'Married Mrs. M'Nab?' suggested Lionel.

'Auchenbothie Castle, which has been the stronghold of our race for centuries, the islands of Meish and Neish in the Outer Hebrides—every acre of land I have left would have gone to the hammer if I had not taken this—unusual, perhaps—but this decided step; if I had not, to put it in plain words, married a Birmingham pin-girl, and not even a good-looking one I'

Lionel, overwhelmed with admiration of this noble deed, was unable for the moment to make any reply. Presently he said, 'It has been a case of virtue its own reward, no doubt.'

Captain M'Nab paused to hit off the head of a thistle with his stick, then, wheeling round upon his companion, he answered, 'You are right; I have never had cause to repent it. My wife is an excellent woman, and perfectly well-bred. Her children take after my side of the house; they were brought up on principles of my own. I never allowed my girls to wear stays until they were grown up—you see the result.'

'Astonishing!' said Lionel, raising his eyes to look at the 'results,' who were some paces on in front.

'When my daughter Flora first entered a ball-room,' pursued the captain, 'there was a general rush, then a perfect scramble for introductions. We were taken for brother and sister.'

'Probably twins,' murmured Lionel.

At this Captain M'Nab darted a sharp look at him, but observing the extreme, almost mournful gravity of the young man's countenance, he continued—

'The Prince of Wales once said of her, "That is a deuced handsome girl." It was at a review; I did not hear it myself; it was repeated to me; but I can believe it, eh?'

'Certainly,' said Lionel.

'It is pretty to see her with the little Williams,' said Captain M'Nab. 'A charming girl, Lionel; charming, that is, for a southron. We would not care about such small figures in our clan. In the old times, when the M'Nabs were in their glory, a girl of that size would have been put to death without mercy; she would never have been suffered to grow up. Well, well, the old days were rough after all.'

The gallant captain continued for some time to dilate upon young ladies and their charms, and Blanche and Elsie came in for a due share of commendation; but when the latter was mentioned Lionel made some excuse to leave him, and walked on with the ladies.

With the assistance of music and games the evening passed gaily, until, the elder gentlemen coming in from the smoking-room, a party of whist was made up. Mr. Fitzgerald, who piqued himself on his skill in the game, had Douglas Ferrars for his partner, while Constance played with Captain M'Nab. Soon Lady Eleanor and Mrs. M'Nab, who were sitting together on the sofa, were startled by a somewhat noisy dispute at the whist-table, which ended in the fiery captain springing up, throwing his cards on the table, and exclaiming, 'I decline to play any longer! After such an accusation I decline it utterly and entirely!'

'What is the matter?' asked Lady Eleanor.

'Hector, I am ashamed of you,' said Mrs. M'Nab. 'To lose your temper over a *game*!'

'What *is* the matter?' said Lady Eleanor again.

'A case of revoke!' cried Mr. Fitzgerald, who also appeared considerably heated,—'a clear case of revoke! You refused spades—you all saw him refuse spades,' he

continued, looking round,—‘and look here!’ He caught up the hand of cards from the table and triumphantly produced the seven of spades.

‘Do you wish to insult me?’ shouted the captain, dancing with rage. ‘I decline to submit—I—I leave this house to-morrow!’ and he seemed about to bolt out of the room, when Lady Eleanor interfered.

‘Captain M’Nab,’ said she, ‘I am sure no rudeness was intended. Frederick, who cares for your trumpery seven of spades? Put it away and be quiet. Tell Captain M’Nab you did not mean to be offensive.’

‘I certainly hope that no one will leave my son’s house,’ said Mr. Fitzgerald; ‘but as to the revoke, it was a palpable one.’

Lady Eleanor waved her hand impatiently; but Captain M’Nab had by this time recovered himself. ‘Lady Eleanor,’ said he magnanimously, ‘I am hot-blooded—I admit it; it is a characteristic of my race. But one word from a lady, and I am disarmed. Let us say no more about this occurrence; I am willing that it should be forgotten.’

Lady Eleanor bowed, so did Mr. Fitzgerald, and a rather awkward silence ensued; then the hostess, discovering that it was more than time to retire, desired Lionel to light the bedroom candles, and forced away the unwilling young party from their game.

‘That Captain M’Nab is the most detestable man,’ said Constance the next morning. ‘Just fancy, Aunt Eleanor, Douglas said he was *so* rude to him last night in the smoking-room.’

‘He is a quarrelsome little creature,’ returned her aunt indifferently. ‘People should not irritate him. What was it all about?’

‘Oh, they got upon politics, and he said the most dreadful things! He thinks all Radicals should be hanged, and wishes Mr. Gladstone to be drawn and quartered.’

‘There would not be many people left in Scotland if his wishes were carried out,’ said Lady Eleanor drily.

'And Douglas did not irritate him,' continued Constance in an injured tone. 'Douglas is not a Radical, you know—he is an advanced Liberal, and his opinion was——'

'And what more did Captain M'Nab do or say?' interrupted her aunt.

'Oh, he was most insulting about that horrid election at Slumborough last year. You know Douglas not getting in was entirely the result of bribery.'

'And did they come to blows?'

'Aunt Eleanor, please do not laugh at it; Douglas might have been killed. Captain M'Nab was gesticulating with a soda-water bottle—just fancy if it had struck him!—but Lionel gave his arm a little jerk and he let it fall, and mercifully it broke on the floor.'

'Well, it is very tiresome,' said Lady Eleanor; 'the carpet will be full of broken glass. I wish the M'Nabs would go away, with all my heart, and what I am to do about Heathfield I don't know, for the silly boy seems quite infatuated with that Miss Williams. The charge of a young man is a heavy responsibility.'

This conversation took place before breakfast, Lady Eleanor and Constance being the first in the dining-room; it was interrupted by Lord Heathfield's entrance, and his aunt did not fail to notice that he wore in his buttonhole a pink carnation which had adorned Miss Williams' dress the evening before.

There was a marked improvement in the weather that day; the gentlemen made preparations to go out to shoot, and Lady Eleanor called her son aside.

'Lionel,' she said, 'remember that I trust to you to take care of Heathfield. He is making a perfect fool of himself with that Miss Williams—his parents would be dreadfully annoyed if they knew.'

'My dear mother, am I Heathfield's keeper?'

'There is no occasion to be profane. Take him out with you to shoot, and keep him with you—that is all I ask. Don't listen to any of his excuses.'

'I can't take him if he doesn't want to go. Besides, I don't know that we can all shoot.'

'Then leave some one else behind—leave the M'Nab boy.'

'The M'Nab boy is going to fish, and Heathfield said something about it too.'

'I won't have Heathfield fish,' cried Lady Eleanor vehemently; 'he will loiter about the house the whole day long. Can't you make some excuse? Leave Douglas Ferrars behind and take Heathfield—tell him you are afraid of Douglas and Captain M'Nab shooting each other.'

Lionel burst out laughing. 'A brilliant idea, mother! I *will* tell him so—it will be a great joke. Heathfield believes everything I tell him if I am only solemn enough.'

'Do not be silly and make a jest of everything, Lionel,' said his mother. 'I would not have you tell an untruth for the world. They really might shoot one another—at least Captain M'Nab might shoot Douglas. Not that he would be any great loss,' she added meditatively.

'Nevertheless it is our duty, as Christians, to prevent bloodshed,' said Lionel. 'Besides, I do not wish to be annoyed with his funeral. Make your mind easy, mother; Heathfield shall go out shooting, and I have asked Major James and Mr. Fairlie to come to-night for the barn dance, so Miss Williams will have plenty of cavaliers.'

While the above conversation was going on, Flora M'Nab had laid hands upon her young brother and forcibly dragged him into the passage.

'Roddy, I want to speak to you.'

'What do you want?' grunted the unwilling Roderick.

'I want to ask you—Papa does not really mean to go away to-day, does he?'

'I am sure I don't know. Can't you ask him yourself?'

'Don't be stupid! it would only put it into his head. He mustn't go till after the dance. I only mean, is he offended with Mr. Fitzgerald still?'

'No—I don't know. There was a row in the smoking-room last night.'

'With Mr. Fitzgerald?'

'No, not him, he went to bed—the other man.'

'Who? tell me quick.'

'Don't claw a fellow. Take away your hand or I'll not tell you anything.'

'Oh, bother! There, I'm not touching you. Who, Roddy?'

'The one with the bald head, I don't know his name.'

'Oh! and you think he'll stay?'

'I don't know and I don't care. Let me away, or I'll get him to go.'

'*You* get him to go indeed!' said Flora contemptuously, for her mind was now quite relieved. 'What are you going to do to-day, Roddy?'

'Fish,' replied Roderick laconically.

'Not shoot?'

'I'm not going to be bothered with all of *them*.'

'But you will have Lord Heathfield if you are going to fish; he said he was going to——'

'I don't want him, he's a fool. Get out of my way, can't you?' and, pushing his sister aside, Roderick went to collect his fishing tackle.

Captain M'Nab said nothing about leaving Ardvaira that day. There had been a slight cloud upon his brow at breakfast; he glared across the table at Douglas Ferrars, who glared back again, but no word passed between them. Lionel did not fail to remind Heathfield of this circumstance, and by his artful representations so worked upon the guileless mind of that excellent young man that he consented to join the shooting party, while Mr. Ferrars was invited by the ladies to drive with them to Glen Torran.

Lady Eleanor had intended that Ethel Williams should accompany her thither, but the young lady excused herself on the plea that driving always gave her a headache; and all the girls of the party begged to be allowed to stay at home and decorate the ballroom. This occupied them the most of the day, and in the afternoon they received assistance from the sportsmen, who came in from shoot-

ing rather early. The work, however, proved too exhausting for some of the party, and when Lady Eleanor returned from her drive she found her nephew and Miss Williams in their accustomed corner of the drawing-room, apparently quite satisfied with themselves and their position.

CHAPTER VI.

‘ I am sham’d thro’ all my nature to have lov’d so slight a thing.’

MAJOR JAMES and Mr. Fairlie were two gentlemen who rented Loch Voira Lodge, a shooting on the other side of the loch, and were pretty frequent visitors at Ardvoira. Major James was a stout, middle-aged man, with a good-natured face and twinkling eyes. He had a fund of quiet humour, a love of the good things of this life, and was a keen observer without seeming to be so. His friend Mr. Fairlie was a much younger man; he was fond of sport and somewhat shy in ladies’ society.

Immediately after dinner the whole party adjourned to the barn, which was a large one, and had been built by old Mr. Macdonald with a view to entertainments of this sort. The night was fine but dark, Lady Elcanor called for a lantern, and with some difficulty one was procured, and care had to be taken not to stray off the farm road or fall into the ditch.

The barn when they arrived, however, was tolerably well lighted with candles and a few Chinese lanterns. One by one they ascended the winding wooden stair; the buzz of talking ceased, and every one stood up as they came in. Some seats had been erected at one end of the room, and as soon as the elders of the party were settled in their places Lionel spoke apart to the musicians, who consisted of the N’Nabs’ piper; Pritchard, who was a performer on the violin; and several other amateurs in the neighbourhood. The pipers struck up a reel, and every one who could dance it was soon in motion. The ball-

room was somewhat crowded, and to a spectator the mass of moving figures was bewildering and the noise deafening, for the music was mingled with the sound of stamping, shouts, and yells. Captain M'Nab particularly distinguished himself; he leaped higher, stamped harder, yelled louder, and snapped his fingers more sonorously than any one else in the room; all animosity seemed to be forgotten.

The first dance was not permitted to be exclusive, every one took a partner from among the farm or house servants, but when it ended Lionel looked about for Elsie. She was sitting down, and he made his way to her at once.

'You not dancing, Elsie? I thought you were famous at reels. You will dance the next with me, won't you? it is a schottisch.'

'I have been sitting out this dance with my partner,' explained Elsie, as she rose and took Lionel's arm; 'he is the fisherman from Loch Voira, and a very agreeable man; but he tells me he can't dance because he has sprained his leg to-morrow fortnight. He hass not fery much English.'

'I am in luck to get you for this, I suppose,' said Lionel, as he led her out; 'I never see you now, Elsie. Why do you avoid me as if I had got some disease?'

'Lionel, don't say that. We must do our duty, you know, to the company; I don't think we are doing it now.'

'Nonsense! this is the dance when we are all allowed to choose our partners; look at Heathfield figuring away with Miss Williams.'

'Yes—come, Lionel, don't let us lose it all; I love a schottisch.'

It was a pretty sight to see Elsie dance; so lightly, and with such evident enjoyment, and yet with a sort of measured grace which prevented the possibility of turning the Highland schottisch into the romp which it is too apt to become. So thought Lady Eleanor as she watched the pair approvingly, but Mrs. M'Nab turned up her nose.

'Miss Ross has just come from abroad, has she not? She seems to affect a sort of French manner.'

'Frenchwomen *do* know how to carry themselves, don't

they?' answered Lady Eleanor. 'Young ladies nowadays so often dance like dairymaids,' and her eye rested on Flora; 'but Elsie did not learn her manners in France.'

The order of the dances generally consisted in two reels and then a waltz for the benefit of the gentlefolks, and after every two or three dances a Gaelic song was called for. The singer had no musical accompaniment, but every one who knew the chorus joined in; while the audience sat in a ring round the room, and every two persons waved a pocket-handkerchief between them, each holding it by a corner, and swaying it gently to and fro in time to the music, according to the Highland custom. After the first two or three dances Lady Eleanor left, accompanied by her husband, the Ferrarses, and Mrs. M'Nab, but the others remained till a pretty late hour. Liberal refreshments had been provided for the dancers down below, but the 'quality' refrained from partaking of these in view of the supper which awaited them at home. At last even the stout-limbed M'Nabs showed symptoms of weariness; and, after Lionel had made a short speech, which was received with much applause, the party withdrew amidst tumultuous and renewed cheering.

There was no lantern this time to guide their steps, and Lionel, drawing Elsie's arm within his, went on in front, feeling his way cautiously.

'Let every man give his arm to a lady and follow,' said he. 'It won't do to fall into that ditch.'

For the last hour or so it had been remarked by Major James, who had been more of a spectator than an actor, that Lord Heathfield had disappeared, and that Miss Williams, whether from fatigue or some other cause, was looking pale and unhappy. In coming down the wooden stair she called out that she had twisted her foot. Several gentlemen proposed to carry her home, but she declined these offers, and managed to walk, supported on each side by Major James and his friend.

'Arc we all in?' cried Lionel as they reached the door.

'Wait one moment,' said Major James. 'There is a lady seriously hurt.'

'Miss Williams! what have you done to yourself?' exclaimed Lionel, as the fair burden was brought into the dining-room, and deposited in the largest arm-chair.

All crowded round with remedies, Lionel brought her a glass of wine, Charley Hargrave knelt down to take off her little shoe, and Captain M'Nab pinched her leg to see if any bones were broken.

'All sound, thank heaven!' said he with a serious face, addressing the company generally. 'In cases like this, always feel the limb first, to see if any bones are broken. When we were stationed at Zanzibar, a friend of mine slipped and broke his leg—bone was broken clean through, and he never would have known it if I had not pointed it out to him. I bandaged it at once—made him a pair of splints of two stout leaves of the aloe plant—bound it up with cocoa-nut matting—had him carried to the ship by a couple of blacks—and in a very few weeks that man was on his legs again. The ship's doctor said no surgeon could have done it better. But this is a simple sprain, if Miss Ross happens to have any—where is Miss Ross?'

Elsie had brought in a little iron kettle; mended up the decaying fire, and at this moment entered with a pair of bellows.

'If it is a sprain,' said she, 'hot water——'

'Ah, that is the thing!' said Major James, taking the bellows from her, and blowing up the fire. 'We shall soon have Miss Williams all right.'

'Hot water, my dear Miss Ross!' cried Charles Hargrave in great excitement. 'When I sprained my ankle, I was ordered to have a continual trickle of cold water upon it night and day!'

'Let us carry Miss Williams into the pantry, and hold her foot under the cock!' suggested Lionel.

'But she could not stay there all night, could she?' said Mr. Fairlie, giving his opinion with diffidence.

'Tight bandages to keep down inflammation!' said somebody else.

'That would only increase it!' shouted another.

'Arnica!' cried Captain M'Nab, raising his voice. 'Flora! Annie! have you brought any?'

By this time the water was hot, and Elsie, with Major James' assistance, bathed the patient's foot with it.

'Thank you,' she said faintly, 'I do think it feels better.'

Lionel drew in a little table, and supplied her with refreshments, saying, 'You must eat, Miss Williams, starvation is the worst thing in the world for a sprain.'

'There is nothing whatever the matter with her,' muttered Blanche, following Elsie as she went to replace the kitchen-bellows; 'look at all those men round her! is it not enough to make one sick?'

'I don't think there is much the matter,' said Elsie, 'but what on earth has become of Heathfield?'

Blanche only shrugged her shoulders, and they returned to the dining-room, where the rest had begun to attack the substantial cold supper.

'Oysters, by all that's glorious!' said Major James. 'Do let me help somebody. Miss Mortimer—Miss Ross, after your errands of mercy?'

'Have some ham with your turkey,' said Lionel, 'I can recommend it. But surely we are not all here—where is Heathfield?'

'Gone to bed two hours ago,' replied Charley Hargrave. 'Where is Roddy M'Nab?'

Every one looked around, and at last his sister Annie said, 'I don't think Roddy left the barn when we did.'

'He did not seem able to tear himself away from Katie Gillies, the grievance's daughter,' said Flora scornfully.

'Never mind him,' said his father, 'he'll turn up, never fear.'

And in truth young Mr. M'Nab returned safely, in company with the servants, at about five in the morning.

'Elsie,' said Blanche, when the two retired for the night, 'I'm tired to death, aren't you? That girl, Ethel Williams, with her airs, is enough to make a saint ill—*did* you see them all taking off her shoe? Yes, you may laugh, Elsie, but Lionel was quite as ready with his advice as any of them. We shall have him at her feet next.'

'I don't think Lionel took a serious view of the case,' said Elsie, 'or Major James either.'

'But Charley did,' said Blanche vindictively, 'he got quite excited about it; upon my word, he grows stupider every day. Really men are the most despicable creatures! I have a great mind to go into a convent.'

With these words Blanche flung herself into bed and buried her head in the bedclothes, as if bidding adieu to the world and its vanities; only looking up again to remark, 'If to-morrow is a wet day and they don't go, I shall remain in this bed until they do.'

Before Elsie got into bed, she threw open the window and looked out, breathing a fervent prayer that the day might be fine. 'If we have two more days of them,' she thought, 'for they cannot go away on Sunday, I do not know what will become of us.'

It seemed a fairish night; the wind was sighing softly in the trees; a faint gray light was creeping up the sky. In the distance she could just hear the regular wash of the tide; all promised well for the morrow, and Elsie slept peacefully. She had forgotten to pull down the blind, and in the morning was awakened by the sun, which streamed into the little room; it was a joyful sight. It was one of those rarely beautiful days which are doubly welcome in the 'broken weather' of a West Highland autumn. Elsie, who had come down a little early for breakfast, went to the door to enjoy the sunshine, and presently caught sight of Lord Heathfield, pacing up and down with a most woe-begone countenance. She went up and spoke to him, and soon the two were deep in conversation. As the gong sounded for breakfast, and they turned to enter the house, Elsie looked up and caught sight of Ethel Williams's face at her window; she had evidently been watching them. Soon afterwards she appeared in the dining-room, limping a little, but declaring that her foot was much better, and that there was nothing to prevent her leaving Ardvoira that day. Every one was down in fairly good time; there was a bustle of preparation, polite speeches and good-byes. Captain M'Nab hurried his party off as soon after breakfast

as might be ; and Lady Eleanor had the satisfaction of seeing the white sails of the yacht round the point, and vanish behind its projecting crags.

‘Thank Heaven they are gone!’ exclaimed Blanche piously, as she extended herself in the best arm-chair the room afforded. ‘What shall we do, Elsie? let us celebrate the occasion in some way.’

‘Come out for a walk, Blanche. There has not been such a fine day since you came, and it is a pity to lose any of it.’

‘A walk?’ said Blanche. ‘I suppose I shall have to take to regular walks some time or other. You know I am getting much stouter—don’t you think so?’

‘Let us walk to the top of the hill then, and see the view—that will be very good for you.’

‘How much thinner do you think it will make me?’ said Blanche, rising lazily, and putting a hand on each side of her shapely waist; ‘that consideration is a good deal more important to me than any view. Well, come along, I’ll get ready.’

The two girls were soon on their way up the hill at the back of the house, which was not very difficult of ascent. They passed first by a little path through the wooded glen, crossing the river by a bridge, then, opening a rustic gate, they found themselves on the dry sunny hillside. Autumn tints had begun to appear unmistakably amongst the foliage; the birches which fringed the river banks had already turned yellow, and were showering their leaves into the brown water. The lady-ferns had faded; and on the hillside the purple heather had turned brown, and the bent grass golden.

‘It is the time when flowers grow old,
And summer trims her mantle’s fringe
With stray threads of autumnal gold.’

‘Now that we are alone,’ said Blanche, ‘tell me about Heathfield. I saw you come in with him this morning, and I have been dying to ask you what has been the matter. Surely Ethel Williams can’t have snubbed him?’

'Oh no!' said Elsie, 'not she, but he has made up his mind to renounce her. She has told him a lie.'

'Dear! how pleased Aunt Eleanor will be! How big a lie was it? What was it about?'

'He had not time to go into it very minutely, and it was a painful subject, but as far as I could gather, it was about Morris's poetry, which she declared she adored, and afterwards he found out that she had never read a line of it.'

'And was that all? was that the cause of all his woe? was that why he went to bed last night at eleven o'clock, and came down this morning looking like a dying fish?' and Blanche kicked away a stone contemptuously.

'He never closed his eyes all night,' said Elsie a little tremulously. 'It's a shame to laugh, but really to think of poor Heathfield not sleeping a wink all night because Ethel Williams told a lie.'

'As if she ever, by any chance, spoke the truth,' said Blanche. 'I could not have believed even Heathfield would have been so idiotic. Now I understand his leaving the ball, but why did she sprain her ankle?'

'I think she really did twist it a little; you know her heels were very high, and I don't think any one gave her his arm down the stair.'

'They could not,' said Blanche indignantly, there was not room. But I should have thought the sprain had been an excuse to stay.'

'I think, poor girl,' said Elsie hesitating, 'that she thought Heathfield had told me about the lie, and she did not like to stay. She might think he was going to tell everybody in the house.'

'Hum,' said Blanche. 'I don't know, but at any rate it is not worth while going into all her petty motives. How narrow people's minds are—how contemptible! Now there was not one of all that set that one could have exchanged an idea with; and our own party are very little better. What do they think of but sport? slaughtering unfortunate grouse and hares and sea-trout?'

'Oh, I do not think that is fair! Now even poor Heathfield is full of ideas, although they may not be very

shrewd ones; and Lionel is very clever when he chooses to give his mind to a thing; and Mr. Hargrave——'

'Don't talk to me about Charley Hargrave unless you are going to abuse him. Ideas! he has no more ideas than a tom-cat!'

'He has no opportunity of expressing them; you snub him every time he opens his mouth.'

'He has not got them to express,' persisted Blanche. 'I am not at all sure,' she went on, 'that marriage is not altogether a mistake. Look at Constance and what she has become—to be sure one need not sink so low as that; but all married women that I ever saw are either wholly given up to society, or they have fallen into a state of drivelling imbecility over their children and servants and house-keeping. Now an unmarried woman can let her mind expand and develop; she can cultivate higher and more exalted thoughts—dear me, how steep this is, Elsie! let us sit down and rest upon those stones.'

Elsie laughed as she sat down beside her. 'If you are going to cultivate these ideas, Blanche, you must really take more exercise. Nobody will believe you are all soul if you are stout.'

Blanche smiled good-humouredly. 'How do you manage to keep so slim, Elsie? you, who don't profess to be all soul. Ah, but I believe you have ideas you don't talk about, you sly creature! perhaps that is what makes you *simpatica* with me. But you were going to say something about Charley—now I should like to have your real unbiassed opinion about him.'

'I like him,' said Elsie. 'I think him good and kind, dear Blanche, and a gentleman. And I am sure he really loves you.'

Blanche pulled up a handful of grass and looked at it attentively. 'Yes,' she said after a moment; 'I think he is all you say, but—you know his relations are all brewers; he is a brewer himself; I should have to live in a flat country (which I am not accustomed to), full of factories, and I should be utterly steeped and saturated in beer. Of course I mean morally. Well, there is not much soul in that, you will allow.'

‘On the contrary, if you give up what you like, not from any mean motive, but for the sake of some one you care for, you would be doing a fine thing, and surely actions are better than ideas.’

‘Well, but I might sink and become debased, and you have no idea how flat the country is—you can scarcely imagine it here,’ and she looked pensively at the landscape. ‘There really is a good deal of soul about these islands and hills and things. Come! I have a great mind to go to the top after all.’

They set themselves once more to the ascent, and in another quarter of an hour had reached the top of the hill.

‘Look, Blanche!’ said Elsie, pointing to a little speck far away on the blue water. ‘I believe that is the M’Nabs’ yacht. What ages it seems since they went!’

‘I hope I shall never see them again,’ said Blanche viciously. ‘After all, wherever one lives, one is sure to have tiresome neighbours. I had forgotten the M’Nabs, and was just thinking of the delightful solitude of this place compared to Stourton. The people there are all so dull, and oh! my dear, if you only saw their clothes! Well, I suppose it is my fate,’ and Blanche sighed deeply. From Blanche’s manner, Elsie felt more sure than she had ever done before of the reality of her affection for Charles Hargrave; she had wondered at times whether Blanche was only playing with him, and felt sorry for the young man, whose gentle courtesy and forbearance she had often admired. She rejoiced, therefore, to see how Blanche seemed to court the subject, and was willing to find fault with her lover in order to be contradicted.

‘Stourton will leave off being a dull neighbourhood when you are in it, Blanche,’ she said gaily. ‘You have plenty of energy in you, and will be able to work reforms. Your destiny shall be to give a higher tone to the society, and put exalted ideas into the people’s heads.’

‘I am to elevate the people,’ said Blanche, ‘while Charley elevates the beer. To do him justice, he has done that partly already, for he has set his face against putting

tobacco into it. Fate is a strange thing, Elsie ; I wonder what will be yours ?’

‘I have no fate,’ answered Elsie. ‘I have not it in me to reform people ; I can suffer, but I cannot fight ; I can only go with the stream. One thing I know ; I shall never marry.’

‘*You* never marry !’ exclaimed Blanche. ‘What rubbish !’

‘It was foretold me once,’ said Elsie dreamily, ‘by a woman who told fortunes by the hand—years ago. I did not believe it—then—— But come, Blanche, we must not spend our lives on the top of this hill. Let us go home, or the people down below will be dragging the river for us.’

‘Or the loch,’ said Blanche. ‘That would keep them amused for some time.’

CHAPTER VII.

‘God calleth preaching folly. Do not grudge
To pick out treasure from an earthen pot.
The worst speak something good ; if all want sense,
God takes a text and preacheth patience.’

‘WE are all going to church to-day,’ said Lady Eleanor in a resolute tone the next morning. ‘I will hear of no excuses. Last Sunday it was the rain which kept you away, and the Sunday before it was something else, but there can be no reason against going to-day ;’ and she pointed to the window, whence the sunshine streamed gaily in.

The weather had undoubtedly been a sufficient excuse the Sunday before. Rain had fallen in torrents, and not one of the party had even ventured out of doors in the morning. Instead, they had collected in the drawing-room, and held some rather hot arguments upon religious questions. The immortality of the soul had formed one of the chief subjects of dispute, and had given rise to a variety of opinions. Douglas Ferrars began by denying that the soul had any existence after death ; he said he had reason for being quite convinced of the contrary, and could not be mistaken. His argument was, that he had once been very nearly drowned, in fact, quite insensible ; and yet, spiritually, he had not experienced anything in particular.

Elsie advanced in reply, that being very nearly drowned is a different thing from being quite drowned, and that if the latter fate had overtaken Mr. Ferrars, he would not, at all events, have been able to come back and relate his experiences.

Mr. Ferrars was fond of telling the story of his escape

from drowning, and it always made his wife very uncomfortable; she did not like to hear him putting forth heterodox opinions; neither did she like to hear him contradicted by Elsie.

'Douglas, dear, we are bound to accept the Church's teaching about a future life. But you know'—turning to Elsie, and speaking in a lowered tone—'he really was quite insensible and cold for two hours! They had three people to rub him, and five hot-water bottles before they could restore animation.'

'There, Elsie!' said Blanche, who had been listening; 'I am sure you will not insist upon Douglas's soul being immortal after that.'

'What is your opinion, Blanche?' asked Lionel. 'Let us have an exposition of your views. We are all attention.'

'I?' said Blanche. 'I am sure *my* soul is immortal; I do not answer for everybody's. I believe that people who cultivate very ignoble affinities, you know, are likely to be ultimately annihilated;' and she looked severely at Hargrave, who was tranquilly reading a yellow novel, and apparently took no interest in the discussion.

'We may find indications of an immortal spirit,' said Heathfield thoughtfully, 'if we examine our own inner consciousness; and I think it would be impious to deny that there is a Divine spark, a germ of immortality, in every nature, however debased.'

'You are right, Basil,' said Lady Eleanor; 'of course there is; and I consider that this conversation is, as you say, impious. Any one would suppose we were all heathens. We ought to read the lessons for the day and a sermon—Frederick! why don't you read us a sermon?'

'Ahem—certainly,' replied Mr. Fitzgerald, without looking up from his paper.

Constance leaned back in her chair and took up her smelling-bottle; Heathfield and Charley Hargrave straightened their legs and solemnised their countenances; but Lionel made haste to change the subject. 'We must go to church at Loch Voira next Sunday,' he said; 'I should like to show you my improvements.'

Lionel had begun by stirring up the heritors to put a new roof upon the church, and contributing largely himself for this purpose. This done, it was soon discovered that the walls needed painting, that the pews were worn-eaten, and that the windows were very inconvenient. The old minister, Mr. M'Phail, being of a liberal turn of mind, had no objection to improvements or even innovations; he saw no approach to 'Papisty' in the stained window which was soon after introduced, nor even in the harmonium which was to supersede the worthy old precentor, whose voice was beginning to give way; and he was grateful to those of his congregation who interested themselves in the 'improvement of the psalmody,' and the training of the choir.

Lionel, who took no small credit to himself for these improvements, seconded his mother readily enough when, the next Sunday morning, she intimated her intention of compelling her guests to attend public worship at Loch Voira.

'Some of you must walk to church,' said Lady Eleanor, looking round, 'but the carriage will hold five if necessary.'

'I would rather walk,' said Elsie.

'And I do not think I shall go at all,' said Constance.

'Not go to church this beautiful day, Constance,' said Lionel.

'Please say kirk, Lionel; it does sound so schismatical to talk of a Presbyterian Church. And I don't feel sure it is right to go.'

'But, Constance, "kirk" is every bit as good a word as "church,"' said Elsie, bristling up in defence of her native tongue, 'and means exactly the same thing.'

'And to say it is not right to go is positively absurd,' said Lady Eleanor, 'and sets a very bad example to the lower classes. When people come to Scotland they must do as the Ro—as others do. We cannot expect to have everything.'

'For my part,' said Blanche, 'I should make a point of attending the church of the country, whatever it might be.'

If I were in the East, I would worship in a mosque with pleasure.'

'You could not,' said Lionel, 'women are not allowed in mosques.'

'The Mahommedans,' observed Charley Hargrave, 'deny that women have souls, you must remember.'

'Then theirs is a most erroneous faith,' said Blanche, 'and I would not go into their mosques if they paid me for it. Elsie, if you are going to walk, I will walk with you—regular exercise, you know,' she added in an undertone as they left the room together.

The two girls took a considerable time to arrange their Sunday bonnets to their satisfaction, and when they came downstairs, found only Lionel and Charley Hargrave waiting for them, the punctual Heathfield having walked on. Charley and Blanche went on in front, and Lionel stopped a moment to survey Elsie approvingly.

'You have put on your black dress to-day; I think I like it better than the white one; and how Sunday-like you look in that little bonnet! I think I should know by your face what day it was. Where do you get that expression, Elsie?'

'It is a Paris bonnet,' said Elsie hastily, 'perhaps that gives it. I can't compliment you on your Sunday appearance, Lionel.'

Lionel's billycock hat was pushed back off his forehead, and he was swinging a little cane. 'You ought to have walked with Heathfield,' he replied, 'there is a pious young man for you! Tall hat, kid gloves, and umbrella complete. Heathfield would be a good fellow,' he added, 'if he was not such an awful prig.'

'He *is* a good fellow,' said Elsie.

They talked of many things as they walked along, Elsie trying to steer clear of dangerous subjects, and establish a pleasant brotherly-and-sisterly footing between them, in which she began to think she had succeeded admirably. Lionel talked about his plans for the future, and told her he had some thoughts of letting Ardvaira and going away for a few years. A friend of his, who had settled in New

Zealand, had asked him to go out there and see the country; and it would be a good idea, he thought, to buy land there and set up a horse farm.

There was an affected carelessness in Lionel's manner when he told her this which did not escape Elsie, and she resolved to be on her guard.

'Do you approve of this plan?' he said, suddenly turning and looking at her.

'Oh, Lionel, I should like you to travel, and to see places and people; I think it is the best thing you could do. But to go to New Zealand—remember your mother has no one but you. And then a *horse* farm! I never heard of a horse farm before—people in New Zealand have sheep farms, don't they?'

'And why should I have a sheep farm?' said Lionel in an offended tone. 'I suppose I may keep horses instead if I like—I understand them, I don't understand sheep—why, Elsie, you look quite shocked! Is a sheep a more godly or virtuous animal than a horse, may I ask? But'—he went on, suddenly laying aside his half scornful tone as he saw her looking vexed—'if you tell me not to go, Elsie, there is an end of it. I don't want to go, goodness knows! and you could keep me here by one word.'

'I don't want to keep you here, Lionel,' said Elsie, in her most matter-of-fact manner, 'because I think travelling would be an excellent thing—it is only New Zealand and horse farming that I do not think advisable.'

'You would have me travel without an object then? anything to get me out of your sight, in short.'

Elsie made no answer, and they walked on a little way in silence, till, as they drew near the church and heard voices in the distance, Lionel felt that he could not afford to indulge in bad temper just then.

'Elsie, say something—I did not mean that, you know.'

She turned her sweet face towards him, smiling. 'No, don't let us quarrel just as we are going to church—let it be peace, Lionel.'

Lionel took her hand and held it as long as he dared, for in another few minutes they came in sight of their

party, as well as the two gentlemen from the lodge, who, seated on the low wall of the churchyard, were awaiting the conclusion of the Gaelic service. Blanche had also with some difficulty hoisted herself upon the wall, and sat there looking rather dejected and very tired.

'Now, Miss Mortimer,' said Major James, when they had greeted the new-comers, 'have you no piece of information for us? Here we are all waiting to be improved—a few remarks upon these gravestones now, would oblige the company.'

'Oh, don't ask me to preach you a sermon,' said Blanche; 'we shall have quite enough of that presently. Who is going to hold forth to-day?'

'A man of the name of Duff, from Aberdeenshire,' said Mr. Fairlie, 'he seems likely to be the successful candidate. You know they are appointing an assistant and successor to old M'Phail.'

'Well, I hope they won't appoint this man,' said Lionel; 'I've heard him, and I never want to hear him again. Ah! there is the Glen Torran waggonette,' and he went forward to open the door for Mrs. Carmichael, who just then drove up with her two little grandsons. The Ardvoira carriage next appeared, Mr. Fitzgerald and his wife being its only occupants; and now the Gaelic worshippers began to issue forth, while the cracked bell announced that the English service was shortly to begin.

'Would Constance not come after all?' asked Elsie as she joined Lady Eleanor.

'No, she made an excuse about Douglas having a headache, and said she was going to sit with him,' was the reply; 'but they may do as they please, I do not care whether they come or not.'

The jangling bell, whose sound was rendered yet more excruciating by the creaking of the wire by which it was pulled, now ceased, to the great relief of all present, and they proceeded to mount the winding stone stairs which led to their respective seats in the gallery. The Ardvoira pew was the largest, that property being the most extensive in the parish; it was the front seat in the middle gallery

directly facing the pulpit. The right hand gallery belonged to Glen Torran, and the left to Loch Voira. The pew was fitted up with large old fashioned chairs with wooden backs and arms, and had lately been furnished with hassocks; the desk in front was hung with crimson cloth. The pulpit had been left as it was, and had a heavy wooden canopy, but the roof of the church had been lined with dark wood, and ornamented with rafters, and the walls, which had formerly been whitewashed, were now painted a dull brick-red. The stained window, which for some weeks had been the wonder of the neighbourhood, some of the congregation regarding it with admiration, others with disapproval, had been put up by old Mrs. Macdonald to the memory of her husband. It represented Abraham about to offer up his son Isaac in sacrifice; the altar occupied the centre of the window, at one side stood Abraham with uplifted knife, at the other side was a ram of ferocious appearance, which to those uninstructed in the Scripture narrative would seem about to butt the patriarch, the thicket in which it was caught by the horns being in a manner left to the imagination.

Many eyes were turned to the Ardvoira pew as Lady Eleanor took her place. She always walked in first and occupied the end seat, a position she was wont to complain of, 'because if I should turn faint'—she would say—'than which nothing could be more likely, how is one to get out?' Yet she never accepted the well-meant offers of her friends to change seats with her, preferring to fortify herself with a fan and a bottle of strong smelling-salts. Next to Lady Eleanor sat Blanche, then Elsie; next to her Mr. Fitzgerald, armed with plaid and air-cushion, Heathfield and Charles Hargrave; while in the opposite corner, several chairs off, Lionel sat alone. He had a fancy for that far corner, observing that he liked to have plenty of room for his legs.

And now the minister ascended the pulpit stairs and was shut in by the beadle. Mr. Duff was fair, florid, and rather stout, with a good-humoured, but not very intellectual countenance; his voice was good, but his delivery somewhat pompous.

‘Let us begin the public worship of God by singing to His praise part of the eighty-fourth Psalm. To the tune of Ballerma.’

He slowly read it over, and the congregation rose ; for the custom of standing to sing, and kneeling to pray, had lately been introduced at Loch Voira church. The familiar words, and something in the plaintive sweetness of the tune, sent a thrill to Elsie’s heart.

‘How lovely is thy dwelling-place,
O Lord of hosts, to me !
The tabernacles of thy grace
How pleasant, Lord, they be !
My thirsty soul longs veh’mently,
Yea fains, thy courts to see :
My very heart and flesh cry out,
O living God, for thee.’

The psalm was a favourite of hers, and she remembered the last time (how long ago it seemed !) that she had heard it in the parish church of St. Ethernans.

Blanche was silent during the first verse, but surely she too liked the music, or she would not have joined in so vigorously with her strong contralto, while Lionel from his distant corner sent forth his deep bass notes with evident satisfaction.

Then followed the long extempore prayer, appointed by the Church of Scotland in her dread of a written liturgy, but of which each minister has his own particular form of words, as familiar to his hearers as though they held the prayer-book in their hands. First came the ascription of praise to Almighty God, dwelling on high above all heavens, amidst light unapproachable, inaccessible, yet holding in His hands the life of every created thing. Then the confession of our own low and lost estate, the utter abjectness of which was particularly insisted upon by this divine. We were worms of the dust, cumberers of the ground ; our spiritual nature was full of wounds and bruises and putrefying sores ; we might call corruption mother and the worm our sister ; we had rolled sin like a sweet morsel under our tongue, and had drunk iniquity like water.

Could we realise the full extent of our vileness we should lay our hands upon our mouths, and our mouths in the dust, crying, 'Unclean, unclean.'

He next dwelt at some length upon the 'scheme of salvation,' devised by the Almighty for our redemption from the slavery of Satan, and the corruptions of our own hearts. Then a thanksgiving that this congregation had not been brought up in Popery or infidelity, but had their birth in this favoured Protestant land, which was illuminated by the pure light of the Gospel teaching. A petition that they might not be deemed unworthy of these high privileges, nor be led to engage in the services of the sanctuary in a spirit of carnality and formality, but that, putting the shoes from off their feet, they might hear the Word with reverence and godly fear, and that the preaching of the same might be good to the use of edifying, and might minister grace unto the hearers, closed the exercise; which was followed by the reading of a chapter from the Old and another from the New Testament. After that a hymn and a short prayer; then came the sermon.

'You will find the subject of the following remarks,' said the preacher, 'in the fifty-fifth Psalm, sixth and following verses: "Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest. Lo, then would I wander far off, and remain in the wilderness. I would hasten my escape from the windy storm and tempest."'

The occupants of the Ardoira pew had listened to the opening services with various feelings. Lady Eleanor, who, it is to be feared, was a little apt to be bored by any church service, even the most ornate, but who made a duty of going to church, and behaving properly when there, settled herself back in her chair with an air of edifying resignation. Blanche had very soon decided in her own mind that the minister was not worth listening to, and did not listen accordingly. Lionel frowned, he did not like this style, and resolved to give his vote against the election. Elsie, who had been stirred and moved by the singing, was disappointed; she hoped a little from the text, which was rather an unusual one for a sermon, and which found an

echo in her own soul ; but what views could that comfortable, well-fed, unimaginative-looking pastor have about it ? They proved to have at least the merit of originality, and he began by gently blaming the Psalmist for his imprudent and ill-considered desire.

First he 'would direct his hearers' attention to the thing wished for ; the instruments by which David desired to accomplish his flight. Wings have been, by the Divine Providence, denied to man. There have been those who, in various ages of the world, have rashly attempted to soar upon pinions of their own construction, and falling head-long, have reaped, in contusions and broken limbs, the consequences of their presumptuous act. In these attempts we may recognise a fitting type of those who, trusting in their own strength, make to themselves refuges of lies, and put confidence in vain fables. Let us seek to cast from us all the appliances of merely human wisdom, not trusting in an arm of flesh, still less in a wing of feathers.

'But the aspiration of the Psalmist was confined to words : "Oh that I had wings like a dove !" Nor, excepting for this, did he suffer any murmur of discontent to pass his lips. How many men in his circumstances would have sought to engage in unwarrantable strife and bloodshed, or at the least have given utterance to unseemly imprecations ! Such, however, is not the language of our text. The Psalmist merely exclaims, "Oh that I had wings !" Had that rash desire been granted him—had David been endowed with the wings of a dove, and been enabled, by their assistance, to wing his flight into the wilderness—what the better would he have been ? Where, we may well ask, would have been the satisfaction of that ?'

The preacher proceeded, in the second place, to consider the wilderness or desert, mentioned in the text. 'Commentators,' he observed, 'are not agreed as to the exact geographical position of the region to which the King of Israel desired to effect a retreat. Some writers suppose it to have been the desert of Sahara ; others contend that the Psalmist, unacquainted as he probably was with the interior of Africa, would rather have sought refuge in the

stony districts of Arabia, or in the wilderness of Sinai, in which his own forefathers had wandered for forty years.' These surmises, however, the minister allowed, were immaterial, and he passed on to describe a wilderness as 'an arid waste of sand, probably destitute of vegetation, resounding with the cries of savage beasts, and abounding with serpents and scorpions of the most venomous description. Exposed to the attacks of these ravenous creatures, and without the means of supporting life, we cannot be led to suppose that David would have been truly happy. Still,' the minister argued, 'if the circumstances in which the Psalmist was placed were attentively considered, it would be found that his wish to escape into the wilderness was not so ill-judged as it at first sight might appear to be. Absalom, from whose rebellious and unfilial conduct David desired to escape, was equally to be dreaded with the lion or the unicorn of the desert; while the treacherous and insidious counsels of Ahithophel contained poison not less deadly than the fangs of the cockatrice or adder.'

He then branched off into an account of the revolt of Absalom, which occupied a considerable time, and which he satisfactorily proved to have been typical of most of the occurrences recorded in the New Testament, as well as applicable to the state of our own hearts at the present day. Returning to the subject of his text, the preacher remarked in conclusion:—'First, how wrong it is to indulge in unreasonable desires, or to seek another sphere than that in which we have been placed by Providence; and secondly, that, the world having been appointed to our first parents as a place of toil, we ought to desire rather to labour in the sweat of our brow'—here the minister wiped his forehead—'than idly to seek repose.' He then summed up his discourse by observing that 'we must beware of permitting ourselves to form harsh judgments of the conduct of others; seeing that even the Psalmist's desire for the wings of a dove, though vain and futile, might, if carefully sifted, be found to contain some grains of that solid wisdom and judgment with which we should all earnestly seek to be endued.'

The sermon ended, the minister gave out an anthem, which was sung but indifferently, the choir not having had much practice in this kind of sacred music. It was followed by the long and comprehensive intercessory prayer. The minister prayed for the Queen : that her horn might be exalted as the horn of an unicorn ; that she might be anointed with fresh oil ; that her crown might flourish upon her head, and that the shadow thereof might fill the land. For the Prince and Princess of Wales, and all the other members of the Royal House. For all those who are placed in authority under the Queen, and over us : that they might be a terror to evil-doers and a praise and protection to such as do well. For the minister of this parish : that he might be blessed in his sitting down and in his rising up ; that he might renew his strength like an eagle ; that his feet might become like hinds' feet ; and that he might long be spared to come in and to go out before this people. For those in the eldership ; for the poor and needy ; for those in comfortable circumstances ; for the rich, who should remember that to whom much is given, of them the more shall justly be required. For the heathen : that the Gospel might be preached in all lands, and might cover the earth as the waters cover the channel of the deep. For the ancient people of Israel : that when the fulness of the nations is brought in, they might lift up a standard in the midst of them. For the sick and afflicted : that they might have the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. For those stretched upon beds of languishing : that they should be caused to rejoice greatly, and to sing aloud upon their beds ; and for all those whom the restraints of Providence that day kept absent from the gates of Zion. Finally, for the assembled congregation : that a blessing might rest upon the services in which they had that day been engaged ; that they might prove to them a foretaste of the joys they should hereafter experience ; that they might be assisted in singing the concluding hymn of praise, dismissed with the Divine blessing, and conducted in safety to their respective places of abode.

To conclude the service, the second Paraphrase was sung, to the tune of Salzburg.

Those who had come to church with any devout feelings had mostly, by this time, sunk into a state of apathy. This was partly Elsie's case; she had come oppressed and anxious, hoping vaguely for something which might direct and comfort her, or at any rate raise her thoughts to a higher level; and though she saw at once that the preacher was formal and commonplace, she yet listened eagerly for some little word of cheering, some suggestion of the hoped-for rest. When the minister complacently informed his hearers that we were not idly to seek repose, Elsie did not, like Blanche, feel tempted to smile. She felt so tired, she bent her head, and could almost have cried with disappointment. The beautiful closing paraphrase was more soothing, and helped to quiet her irritated nerves. She stood merely listening, until near the end, then suddenly raising her head, she joined in with a good heart at the words,

‘O spread Thy cov’ring wings around,
Till all our wand’rings cease,
And at our Father’s lov’d abode
Our souls arrive in peace.’

As they came out of Church, Elsie felt her hand warmly grasped by Mrs. Carmichael, who was close behind. ‘My dear, now see that you drive home, like a sensible girl,’ said that lady. ‘These long trails will just be the death of you.’ Then, in a lowered tone, ‘Heard ye ever such a rigmarole of nonsense? Now James will be ill-pleased at me if I don’t ask the minister to dinner; I wish he would come to church himself, and he would maybe not be so keen to have the minister asked. But I must go, or I’ll not catch him, stupid ass!’

‘Blanche, shall we drive home?’ said Elsie.

‘Certainly, drive home,’ said Lady Eleanor, overhearing her. ‘Get in at once, both of you. Well, what did you think of the service?’

‘The singing is wonderfully good for a country church,’ said Blanche. ‘But, mercy upon us! what rubbish the man did talk! Elsie, what do you say?’

'Yes,' said Elsie, sighing. 'I don't suppose there is any harm in him, but he is a thoroughly stupid man, and he will never improve, he is so self-satisfied. There are many such—but I hope they will not elect him.'

'Oh yes, they will,' said Blanche. 'A man like that is sure to be a Conservative; he is so pleased with everything as it is, and you will see Lionel will pine to have him.'

'Well, why not?' said Lady Eleanor. 'A good, respectable, pious creature, I have no doubt.'

'I am glad Constance did not come,' said Blanche. 'She would have been shocked, and that is so tiresome.'

'She would have been shocked at the wrong thing,' said Elsie, 'at his accent and manner, and way of conducting the service, which is not the thing which is of consequence.'

'As to the sermon,' said Blanche, 'it is, after all, not greater nonsense than I have often heard from the pulpit in England. I think sermons are a mistake altogether; at least, they always rouse my worst feelings.'

'You ought to be ashamed of yourself, then, Blanche,' said Lady Eleanor severely, 'and I wonder that you girls can permit yourselves to talk on sacred subjects with so little sense of—of how you ought to talk. It does not seem to me that you have any principle, either of you.'

'Perhaps not I, Aunt Eleanor, but don't scold Elsie; she is a perfect mass of principle.'

'I cannot, for my part, see that she is a mass of anything,' said Lady Eleanor, 'pray do not let me hear such expressions.'

'Young ladies,' observed Mr. Fitzgerald, 'are fond of indulging in exaggerated language.'

'I have not heard your opinion of the sermon,' said Blanche, regarding her uncle and aunt with a look of innocent inquiry.

But Lady Eleanor, who had not listened to one word of the discourse, declined to commit herself in any way, and declared that she would have no more discussion upon the subject, since it was conducted in such an unbecoming spirit.

CHAPTER VIII.

'I could not see, for blinding tears,
The glories of the west ;
A heavenly music filled mine ears,
A heavenly peace my breast.
" Come unto Me—come unto Me,
All ye that labour, unto Me,
Ye heavy laden, come to Me,
And I will give you rest.' '

It was the custom at Ardvoira on Sunday to have tea in the drawing-room instead of in the library, and at an earlier hour, as the party had necessarily partaken of a light and early luncheon, to suit the hour of service.

Lionel did not appear until tea-time, and came in at last, saying, 'I have been making inquiries about the election, and I do not think we are likely to have Mr. Duff. The old people object to him, as they cannot understand his Gaelic—he is a Lowlander born, of course. I shall try and get in Macdougall, that little man we heard two Sundays ago.'

'Oh yes, Lionel,' said Elsie eagerly, 'I liked that little man very much——' She stopped abruptly, wishing she had not spoken, as she caught sight of Lionel's look of pleasure at the personal interest she seemed to take in the parish.

Blanche, who had left the room a few minutes before, now reappeared in her walking things.

'Why, Blanche,' said Elsie, 'I thought you were tired. Are you going for another walk?'

'To be sure,' answered Blanche. 'Remember that we must not "idly seek repose." I wonder if Mr. Duff

walks for the benefit of his figure ; he would if he were wise.'

'We had better all go for a walk,' said Lady Eleanor rising, 'and Blanche, I wish you would not be so flippant.'

Elsie did not feel inclined to go out with the others. The exertions of the last few days had really tired her, and she felt that she would be glad of a little quiet ; so, taking a book, she withdrew to the library, and seated herself by the west window.

She had not been long there when Lionel came in. He took a turn through the room, as if half undecided, then went to the piano and began to play. Elsie was occupied with her own thoughts, and did not at first observe the restlessness expressed in his whole manner. A volume of Newman's sermons lay upon her knee, but she was not reading ; her clasped hands rested on the open book, and her sad eyes were fixed upon the distant peaks of Jura, which looked faint and ghost-like in the soft autumnal light.

Lionel sat and played, pausing from time to time. From his seat at the piano he could just see the outline of her cheek, and her shining plaits of hair ; her face was turned from him, and her thoughts were far away. He felt that he scarcely dared to speak to her ; yet he must give some expression to the passionate yearning love which filled his soul, and he played Schumann's 'Liebeslied.' Elsie turned her head, and listened with a sort of wonder on her face ; she had never heard him play so beautifully. Suddenly he broke into a strain so loud and wild and thrilling that it startled her entirely out of her dream, and filled her with a vague fear. It was Liszt's transcription of the 'Erlkönig' ; Elsie knew it well, and the words almost seemed to haunt her. She rose, and, drawn by a power she could not resist, went and stood nearer to the piano. Lionel's face, lit up as it was with excitement, was so beautiful as he played, that she could not turn away her gaze from it ; his dark eyes were filled with a strange fire. As she drew near he stopped abruptly and came towards her ; something in his look frightened her, and she half put out her trembling hand to keep him back.

'Do not stop, Lionel,' she said, 'go on playing, but not that — something softer. Play "Auf dem Wasser zu singen," or that "Abends," by Raff, which you played the other night.'

'No, Elsie, I cannot ; there is something I *must* say to you.'

'What have you to say to me, Lionel?' said Elsie sternly, her very fear giving her a desperate courage.

She stood before him, tall and pale, looking straight into his eyes as if to quench the passionate fire in them with the grave proud calmness of her own.

'Is it about New Zealand—that you will give up that foolish plan? O Lionel!' and her tone changed to pleading—'say it is that you have come to tell me.'

'It is not that,' said Lionel ; listen — no, Elsie, you *shall* listen to me ; I have kept silence for years, and now I must speak. You know what I have got to say ; you have known it all along. You know that I have loved you from the first day I saw you. Tell me how much longer I must wait. It *must* be that you will care for me some time.'

'Never, never !' cried Elsie, bursting into tears. 'Oh, Lionel, my boy, I do care for you, but not—not like that.'

'It is a sin,' said Lionel, beginning to stride about the room in his anger. 'Why will you waste your love upon the dead, who neither know nor care, when there is a living——'

Elsie had turned from him, and covered her face.

'I have hurt you,' said Lionel, 'I am a brute beast. I will go away and never annoy you any more. Say one word to me, Elsie, before I go.'

'Lionel,' said Elsie, calming herself, and lifting her head, 'I want you to understand. Whether the dead know about us or not'—her voice trembled, but she controlled herself by an effort—'we cannot tell—very likely not. But I gave myself to David—not for this life only, but for ever, and I will not change or be untrue to him because he is dead. I will love you, dear Lionel, like a

sister—more than any sister, but you must never speak to me again like this.’

‘And is that your last word to me then,’ said Lionel somewhat bitterly, ‘after I have waited years for a little hope. Elsie, your heart must be like a piece of stone!’

‘I have only been a misery to you, said Elsie, her voice failing again, ‘but I did not mean it. I ought never to have come to this place.

Lionel walked to the window, and stood there looking out, then he came back to her.

‘I am going,’ he said; ‘I will vex you no more, Elsie. But do you not think that in time—a long time——’

Elsie shook her head. ‘I would if I could,’ she sobbed, and stretched out her hands to him. ‘Oh, dear Lionel! I would if I could.’

He took her hands gently in his, stooped down and kissed her, and was gone; and Elsie, laying her head on the chair, cried bitterly and without restraint.

She did not know how long she had crouched there, when voices and steps on the gravel outside warned her that the walking party had returned. She started up, and mechanically pushing back her ruffled hair, withdrew into the shadow, and waited until the steps had passed the library door, then darted into the passage. She dared not go to her room for fear of meeting Blanche, the open air was her only refuge; so putting on a little gray cap which lay in the entrance-hall (it happened to be Lionel’s), she opened the door softly, and fled like a hunted hare towards the shore.

That she must get away, leave Ardvoira at once, was her one thought—yet whither could she go? Her father forbade her to come to Rossie; Aunt Grizel in her feeble state was scarcely fit to receive a sudden visitor; and she was most unwilling to return to England without visiting her home.

These thoughts passed quickly through her mind as she hurried towards the sea, not caring where she went if

only she could leave some of her pain behind, while strangely the words she had heard in church rang in her ears and mingled with her thoughts. 'Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away and be at rest. Lo, then would I wander far off, and remain in the wilderness. I would *hasten* my escape from the windy storm and tempest.'

Elsie spoke the last words aloud; she had by this time reached the rocks, whose sharp black points stretched out far into the water, for the tide was going out. She never paused to take breath, but hastened on, springing from one rock, slippery with sea-weed, to another, till she saw that the pools at her feet were crimson, and the whole sky and sea and land were lighted up with the glory of the sunset. Then she stopped and looked out towards the west. The sun was sinking behind the distant islands, and the sky above was crimson, speckled with purple clouds. She stood and gazed until the sun's last spark had gone down behind the sharp rocky hills of Jura, and a fiery orange glow had come into its place, giving a new splendour to the sky. Before the solemn grandeur of the sunset Elsie lost sight for the moment of her trouble; it came before her like a reproof for making so much of her own petty griefs; and life and its sorrows seemed like shadows, to vanish in the light of the world to come. She sat down upon the rock and did not stir till the crimson overhead had faded into orange, and the orange into a tender green, while the fiery light in the west had deepened into a dull red glow, like the heart of a dying fire. Then a moaning sound was heard far out at sea, for heavy gray clouds came driving up, and a chill wind began to blow.

Elsie shivered, and rose with difficulty, for her limbs were cramped, but a sense of peace and a new courage had come back to her heart. She began to make her way back to the house, thinking over what had happened and what would be best to do. That she must leave Ardvora, and at once, was certain; she would even, perhaps, no longer be welcome there, for not only had she lost Lionel for the present, as a friend and companion, but had, too

probably, hopelessly estranged Lady Eleanor's affection. It was impossible, Elsie knew, to keep her in ignorance of what had occurred, and she would almost certainly be deeply hurt and indignant on her boy's account.

Elsie resolved to write a note asking her Aunt Grizel to receive her the next night (a telegram, she knew, would startle the old lady as much as a sudden arrival), and find some means of getting it despatched early the following morning; and she herself would start for St. Ethernans later in the day, although she would thus have to spend the night somewhere *en route*.

It was very dark when she reached the house; she had to feel for the door-handle, which her chilled hands could scarcely turn. She went in, and toiled wearily upstairs to her own room, where a bright fire was burning. A letter on the mantelpiece caught her eye; she took it up, a little surprised, as letters were not usually received at Ardvoira on Sunday. It was addressed in Euphemia's straggling handwriting, and ran as follows:—

‘ROSSIE, *September 30th.*

‘DEAR ELSIE,—I was not able to send Word sooner about little Peter in answer to your kind Inquiry for we have been that taken up owing to little Allan having likewise got the fever too. The Doctor said to get a Nurse to them and we got one from Edinburgh and thought her a Superior Person but yesterday the Captain found her in that State he just took and sent her away Immediate and the Doctor said to get another but the Captain will not for he thinks they are all likely given to their Bottle. My hands are terribly full for Agnes cannot leave Granny she is now entirely Bedrid and my dear Elsie if you would come and help me with the little Boys I would be very Thankful and the Captain I have not told him but he would not say a Word once you are in the House for he is extraordinary taken up with you and I would not ask you to leave your Grand Friends but that you said you would like to come to Rossie and what will I do if little Allan is taken from me for he is far worse with the Complaint

than Peter. Hoping you are quite well.—I remain yours affectionately,
E. Ross.'

Here was an end to all Elsie's difficulties at once.

Poor Euphemia! poor little boys! Of course she would go to Rossie; and she began hastily to consider how soon she could start on her journey. When the dressing-gong sounded, and the housemaid entered with the hot water, Elsie questioned her eagerly.

'Barbara, how did the letters come to-day?'

'Please, ma'am, Chonnee Gillies was coming from Portarnish, and he would caal at the post-office,' was the reply. Young John Gillies was a grocer's apprentice in Portarnish, and occasionally paid his family a visit on Sundays.

'Oh, Barbara! please say I cannot come down to dinner—I have had bad news from home; but you need not say that, Barbara, just say I have a headache.'

'Yes ma'am,' said the girl in a subdued and awestruck tone. 'Please, ma'am, will you be taking any dinner?'

'No, I will have a cup of coffee later. And will you find out when the early steamer for Oban passes, and come and tell me.'

'Yes, ma'am,' said Barbara again. Her rosy face had lengthened considerably; she moved away softly, and shut the door after her with the elaborate caution which she considered that Elsie's grief-stricken appearance demanded.

Elsie began to put together a few of the things she would require for her journey. 'Perhaps,' thought she, 'Lady Eleanor need not, after all, be told about Lionel; this call is quite a sufficient reason for my leaving at once. Shall I go and speak to her now?' and she glanced at herself in the glass. 'No! I will wait till after dinner.'

Barbara by and by returned with some coffee, and the information that the steamer going to Oban might be expected to pass Ardvaira Point between four and five in the morning. She begged to know if she could do anything for Elsie.

‘No, Barbara, thank you; I am going by the steamer, as my little brother is very ill, but I must speak to Lady Eleanor first.’

‘It is a peety,’ said Barbara sympathetically; adding with indignation, ‘Chon Gillies was thinking he was fery clever pringing the post letters on the Saabath; but he might have let them abee whatever if he was to pring the pad news.’

Elsie had nearly finished her preparations, and was thinking how she could bring about an interview with her hostess, when a tap was heard at the door, and Lady Eleanor entered hastily.

‘Elsie, what is all this, and what has become of Li——’ she stopped as her eye fell upon Elsie’s open trunk.

‘Oh! Lady Eleanor, I have heard from Euphemia—my little brothers are both ill, and they need me at home. I was coming to tell you, only——’

‘At home?’ repeated Lady Eleanor—‘at Rossie? Absurd! I will not hear of it. But pray where is Lionel gone? for that is what I came to ask you.’

‘Lionel!’ exclaimed Elsie, seized with a sudden terror, and putting her hand upon the table for support—‘I—I don’t know. Was he not at dinner?’

Lady Eleanor eyed her with great astonishment, not unmixed with indignation. ‘Elsie,’ she said, moving forward so as to get a full view of the girl’s face—‘I insist upon knowing the meaning of this. Lionel has gone to Portarnish, leaving no comprehensible message, and I desire you to tell me what has happened, as I see by your manner that you know perfectly well. And what in the world are you crying about, child?’

‘Oh! Lady Eleanor, I never dreamt of Lionel going away—but he will come back—you must send for him. I am the one who should go, and you see I—I am just packing up. It is dreadful—it is not to be borne, that Lionel should go away because of me.’

‘Do try to talk like a rational being, Elsie,’ said Lady Eleanor impatiently. ‘Lionel has proposed to you, I imagine—well, what was your answer?’

‘I cannot marry Lionel,’ said Elsie in a low voice; ‘he

knows that. I 'am very, very sorry that he should care about me in that way.'

'You refused him?'

'What else could I do?' said Elsie despairingly.

There was a short pause.

'Well,' said Lady Eleanor with great and marked coldness, 'I cannot insist on your marrying my son. This is not what I expected from you, or hoped, but you are free to do as you like of course. I think it a little odd, that is all;' and she moved as if to leave the room, then breaking into a sudden sob, she cried out, 'You have driven away my boy, and I shall *never* see him again.'

'No, no, hush!' cried Elsie eagerly, 'do not say such things. He will come back—you must send for him—you must telegraph. Where has he gone?'

'To Australia, I suppose, where he has always threatened to go—to the farthest off place he can find. He will not come back for my sending, girl.'

'He will, if you tell him I am not here. Besides, he can't have gone to Australia without his luggage,' said Elsie, practical even in her excitement; 'at any rate he can't have gone far yet. How and when did he go? And what message did he leave?'

To this Lady Eleanor replied that she had not seen him herself, but had been told, that about six o'clock, when the letters came from Portarnish, Lionel, after receiving his, had ordered the dog-cart to be got ready, and his portmanteau to be packed, and had started, leaving a message with the servants that he was going to sleep at the inn at Portarnish that night, and take the early steamer to Glasgow in the morning.

It was not without difficulty that Elsie elicited this information, which somewhat tranquillised her mind; though she was still nervously anxious that Lionel should be sent for home.

'Then, Lady Eleanor, perhaps he has had some business letter, he *may* not have left on my account. But telegraph to him—to the house of his man of business, and say I am gone to Rossie. That will bring him back.'

‘But how can I let you go to Rossie when it is not safe? No, Lionel will never come back; you have driven him away, and there is an end of it.’

‘Listen, Lady Eleanor. In any case I must go to Rossie; so, why not send the telegram, which will certainly bring Lionel back to you? It is quite necessary that I should go to help my stepmother. See! here is her letter—let me read it to you.’

‘I can make no sense of it,’ said Lady Eleanor, interrupting her when she had read a few sentences. ‘I don’t believe it is safe to let you go—I don’t know what you want me to do—and what am I to say to Lionel?’

Elsie took a sheet of paper from her blotting-book, and wrote: ‘Come back at once; Elsie has been sent for home.’

‘There,’ she said, ‘will not that do for the telegram? Then my steamer will pass Ardvoir Point between four and five in the morning. May I have Duncan M’Intyre and the boat to go out to her?’

‘You confuse me so,’ said Lady Eleanor. ‘Are you sure that this—’ holding out the sheet of paper—‘will bring him back?’

‘It will certainly bring him, or else a letter from him,’ replied Elsie confidently. ‘And about the boat?’

‘You say your father wants you at home? I do not understand——’

‘Not my father’—hesitating—‘my stepmother, but——’

‘Read me the letter,’ said Lady Eleanor very angrily. Elsie did so.

‘I do not think I can let you go.’

‘Then you cannot send the telegram.’

They sat looking at each other for some time in silence; then Elsie came and knelt down beside her.

‘You see, dear Lady Eleanor, you must let me go.’

And Lady Eleanor let her go.

CHAPTER IX

'O dream of joy ! is this indeed
The lighthouse top I see ?
Is this the hill ? is this the kirk ?
Is this mine own countree ?'

ELSIE left Ardvoira in the gray light of the early morning, and after a long wait upon the rocks for the expected steamer—so long that she began to despair of reaching Oban in time to catch her train—she at last got safely on board. There was no clear sunrise, but a dull red light in the eastern sky, which was piled with heavy gray clouds above, seemed to threaten stormy weather, while a cold whistling wind blew from the south-east. After a long journey and many changes, she at last reached the well-known Crossbriggs Junction, and took the coach for Drumsheugh. The rain, which was only threatening in the west coast, had come on in good earnest here—heavy dashing rain from the east, with fierce blasts of wind, and Elsie was fain to content herself with an inside place in the coach. It was four in the afternoon when it drew up at the door of the Ochil Arms, the principal inn in the village. Elsie noticed with annoyance that it appeared to be the scene of unusual excitement this afternoon, for she had counted on a quiet rest by the fire, and a cup of tea, before encountering the short but stormy ferry. The inn resounded with coarse voices, fiddling, and stamping of feet.

'Is there anything going on here ?' she inquired of the coach driver as she paid his fare.

'Ou no,' replied the man ; 'it's the feeing market in St.

Ethernans the day, and a wheen fowks come ower here to hae a dance.'

'Thè feeing market,' thought Elsie; 'how unlucky!' She remembered that her father would never let her go near St. Ethernans on the occasion of this annual festival, which was attended by farm servants of both sexes, in order to be hired for the ensuing Martinmas term, and at which it appeared to be *de rigueur* that every one should be dead drunk. 'I shall never get a carriage in St. Ethernans,' she thought, 'the people will be too tipsy, and I do not think I could walk the three miles in the rain. I will hire a dogcart or something here, and drive across the moor; it will not take me any longer after all.'

'Can I have a carriage to take me to Rossie at once?' she inquired of the landlady, Mrs. Braid, a stout matron, whose flushed face and dishevelled headgear showed that she had been a sharer in all the excitement, if not in the actual revelry of the occasion.

'Rossie?' said the woman. 'It's a lang rod. Jock!' she shouted, addressing some one in the kitchen—'Can the ledly hae a machine to gang to Rossie?'

'Yas,' answered the invisible Jock laconically.

'Awa' to the yaird then, and get it yokit.'

'Can I have a cup of tea?' asked Elsie, a little doubtfully; 'or is the parlour full?'

'Ou, there's just twa-three gentlemen in there wi' their drap toddy. Gang inower to the fire, mem, or I mask the tea. Maggie!' raising her voice, although the conversation throughout had been conducted in a sufficiently loud key—'Maggie! Here a ledly seekin' tea. Deil's in the lassie, what's she kecklin' at?' as shouts of laughter issued from some back region. 'My word! but I'll sort ye, ance I get a haud o' ye,' and she departed in pursuit of her too mirthful handmaiden.

Elsie pushed open the parlour door, and looked in; but the confined air, the fumes of whisky, and the loud, rather quarrelsome talk of the 'twa-three,' or, more accurately, nine or ten 'gentlemen' therein assembled, caused her to

retreat quickly into the passage. She sat down on the top of her box till the landlady reappeared.

'Mrs. Braid,' she said, 'I will not take tea, thank you—I have changed my mind. Do you think they are getting the carriage?'

'Jock!' shouted Mrs. Braid, 'are ye no awa' yet?' She went away, and returned after a long, but apparently fruitless argument with Jock, who seemed to be half asleep, to assure Elsie, if she would 'just take a seat' in the parlour, the 'machine' would be forthcoming.

But Elsie was in no mood for patient waiting. She rose, and went herself into the inn-yard, where, to her great joy, she recognised one of the ostlers, a respectable-looking lad, who had once been a stable-boy at Rossie. She went up to him and addressed him by name, 'Andrew Wallace.'

The lad turned round quickly, and evidently knew her at once; but not deeming it consistent with etiquette to appear surprised, only touched his cap, saying respectfully, 'I hope you're well, ma'am.'

'Andrew,' said Elsie, 'could you drive me over the moor to Rossie? I want to go immediately.'

'I'll do that, ma'am,' replied Andrew with alacrity. 'Will I get the dogcart?'

'Yes, please, anything—as soon as you can,' and Elsie returned to the inn, and resumed her seat upon her box till the dogcart came round.

It awakened considerable excitement in the minds of the revellers, as well as in those of the street boys; and a crowd speedily collected at the inn door to witness the start, and make their comments thereupon. 'Aundry!' cried one. 'Eh! see at Aundry, awa' to drive the ledly!' 'A—ay! he's a pawky ane!' 'Dinna cowp her!' 'Nae faer o'm! wull ye gie's a ride ahent?' 'Come down here, till I gie ye a SMAACK in the face!'

This last invitation, of which, as it may be supposed, Andrew did not hasten to avail himself, was given by an individual of peculiarly festive appearance, who reeled up to the dogcart, and seemed to be under the impression that he could climb into it backwards; but Elsie and her

box being now in their places, Andrew drove off with all speed, pursued by laughter, 'hurrahs,' and shouts of decision from the assembled crowd.

Elsie's relief was so great that at first she scarcely felt the rain dashing in her face, or the gusts of wind, against which it was hopeless to hold up an umbrella. She drew the hood of her mackintosh over her Sunday bonnet, which she had resumed at the outset of her journey, partly because it was the first which came to hand, partly from a vague impression that it gave her a somewhat venerable appearance, and that it was more seemly to undertake a journey, with a view of nursing the sick, in a bonnet than in a hat. As they ascended the hill, and reached the high and bleak moorland district, she began to feel thoroughly chilled; her cheeks smarted with the cutting rain, and the cold wind felt all the more piercing after the soft air of the West Coast. The horse stumbled, shook its head, and in spite of pretty frequent applications of the whip, kept slackening its pace. Andrew got out to walk up the long steep hill, and Elsie, in spite of his remonstrances, did the same.

'Poor beast! he is tired,' she said. 'Andrew, be sure you give him a feed when we get to Rossie, but do not come into the house yourself, for fear of spreading the fever; ask Mrs. Duncan at the farm to give you your tea.'

At length the long drive came to an end, and with a thrill of pleasure Elsie passed up the well-known avenue and reached the door of her home. Before she had time to enter, the Laird himself appeared on the threshold; and as Elsie hurried up the steps to meet him, he put out his arm with a wondering look, as if to prevent her coming nearer. 'Elsie! what—what are you doing here?' he said hoarsely. But Elsie was not to be repelled, she was too happy to be at home again; and, for the first time in her life, she threw her arms round his neck. 'Papa!' she cried with a low laugh of pleasure—'you will not turn me away from your own door?'

The Laird uttered a sort of grunt, but he half returned his daughter's embrace, and almost lifted her into the house.

'You're—you're all wet,' he said, touching her shoulder gently with his hand.

'Papa, how is Allan?'

Her father stared at her, and then turned away.

'No chance for him,' said he—'no chance for either of them. That doctor's a fool.'

'But little Peter,' said Elsie trembling, 'I thought he was much better?'

'Good Lord!' burst out the Laird, striking his forehead violently; 'what does it matter what he dies of? he's always sick. And you—you'll be the next one!' turning fiercely on his daughter. 'What, in the devil's name, brought you here?'

Elsie noticed with pain how changed and aged her father looked; how the lines on his face had deepened, and his limbs shrunk; he did not look half the size he used to be. She did not mind his rough reception of her, which was in truth rather affectionate than otherwise, and he was full of concern for her wet and cold condition. He took off her wet cloak himself, and would not permit her to go to Euphemia, who was in the sickroom, but desired the maid to prepare some food.

'I will go to the kitchen fire,' said Elsie, 'and speak to Marjorie.' As she went through the passage, the peculiar odour of the disinfectants sickened her a little, and made her realise more strongly the presence of illness, perhaps of coming death.

Marjorie hurried to meet her, for the news of Elsie's arrival had quickly spread through the house, and welcomed her with a trembling delight which she could hardly find words to express, and of which Elsie had scarcely believed the undemonstrative Marjorie capable.

'Eh! Miss Elsie, my puir lamb! siccan a night to come hame, and you just dreepin'! Eh, lassie! but I've wearied sair for ye,' and Marjorie wiped her eyes. 'Jessie, woman! put on a bit fire in the White room, and tak' down the sheets to get aired. Crater, ye'll be stairvin,' she added, turning to Elsie, and hastening her preparations for a substantial tea.

'Oh, Marjorie! the poor little boys!' said Elsie sorrowfully. 'Are they in great danger?'

Marjorie looked at her in slight surprise. 'No the Peter one,' she said, turning a piece of bread she was toasting upon her fork. 'He's comin' on fine, Miss Elsie; but he's a weary bit thing, ye ken.'

'But Allan?' said Elsie breathlessly.

'Ay, he's been awfu' ill, but we're thinkin' he's taen the turn; the doctor was rael weel pleased wi' him the day.'

'Well, I'll go upstairs,' said Elsie.

But Marjorie earnestly entreated her not to go to Euphemia until she had eaten. 'It micht be your deith,' she said.

Elsie consented, and having changed her dress, went to sit with her father until Euphemia came down.

It was quite true that little Allen had 'taken the turn,' as the nurses phrased it, and was on the fair way to recovery. Peter, too, was entirely convalescent, and able to sit up in bed, in his little red flannel gown, smiling, and hugging a black kitten, which had been brought in for his amusement. Elsie went to see the children, but was too worn out that evening to be of any assistance to her step-mother; the next morning, however, they shared the duties of the sickroom together. Euphemia had no turn for nursing; strange to say, it was her awkward sister Agnes who had always attended upon the aged grandmother; and Euphemia, active and housewifely as she was, was utterly helpless in cases of illness. Marjorie therefore had enjoyed the post of head-nurse up to the time of Elsie's arrival, and had ordered about her mistress in a way which was highly satisfactory to herself.

On the following day Allan was pronounced out of danger; all went well; and Elsie, in spite of the aching limbs which her wet drive and previous fatigues had given her, felt light-hearted and happy, as she had never thought to be again. Euphemia was very grateful and affectionate; she shed many tears, and poured out to her stepdaughter long histories of the children's illness and of her own anxieties and fears.

'Oh, Elsie! it's been an awful time! now you've come we must hope the best, but I've had like a warning not to rejoice too soon. Hope the best and fear the worst, as Mr. Souter always says—and oh! he's a godly man!'

'How do you mean you have had a warning, Euphemia?' asked Elsie, cutting short the praises of Mr. Souter, the Free Kirk minister, which she foresaw Euphemia was about to pour forth.

'Oh, my dear, I thought that Allan would maybe not take the fever at all, for he was near a fortnight after Peter, and the doctor, he thought so too; but oh, it's a dangerous complaint! Peter, he had it mildly, but there's Angus Cameron lost two children, and there's more cases about; and here was Allan just as ill as he could be. For three nights that child was carried,¹ and he only came to his right mind the day you came. Me, I was near out of my judgment with it all!'

'I wish I had come sooner,' said Elsie, 'but my father wrote so peremptorily——'

'Ay would he!' broke in Euphemia excitedly, 'he was that positive, he wouldn't let me speak of sending for you; he said he wouldn't have you brought here to your death, and used words about it; but when little Allan turned so ill, I thought he was quieter like, and I just ventured; for you know he had parted with the nurse at his own hand, and he wouldn't get another, and 'deed I don't know that she was much use, for she just drank even on, and snored so that nobody could get any sleep; and so I spoke to him at last, but he just raged on me, so I took it upon myself, and you see it's all for the best.'

'I saw by your letter,' said Elsie, 'that you were dreadfully anxious about Allan, but I think we may really hope that he is quite out of danger now.'

'Oh, my dear,' said Euphemia, lifting her hands, 'the night I wrote to you I thought he was gone! I didn't know what to do, and I went for your father, and *he* thought he was gone, and oh! I thought if Mr. Souter was there to put up a prayer; but when I named it to your

¹ Delirious.

father he used words again, for he never will hear tell of the minister in the house, and him such a godly man. Eh! dear, dear!' and Euphemia sighed dismally.

In this manner did the afflicted mother relieve her overburdened heart, and Elsie listened to many tales of a like nature, until the conversation was interrupted by the Laird, who entered with the resolved step of one who has business on hand.

'I never heard such a chatterer as that woman is,' he remarked, eyeing his spouse grimly, but addressing no one in particular; 'she would talk your head off if you gave her time. Elsie, go you and put on your things; I'm going to take you to St. Ethernans to see the old lady.'

'Oh!' said Elsie, rising doubtfully, 'I should like that, papa, if——'

'I'm sure I don't know,' said Euphemia plaintively. 'I daresay I'll manage; but there's Peter to get his dinner, and he likes Elsie to feed him, and——'

'I tell you I won't have her kept in the house,' interrupted her husband. 'What's the use of you if you can't feed your own children? Elsie, the dogcart will be round in five minutes—if you don't want to come you can stay at home,' and the Laird, rather offended, strode off, without waiting for an answer.

In another quarter of an hour Elsie was ready, and waiting in the hall; but neither her father nor his dogcart had as yet made their appearance. In course of time, however, the dogcart came round; and the Laird, having ascertained, by putting his head out of his room and feigning to look for his boots behind the door, that his daughter was ready, and appeared willing and desirous to accompany him, at last emerged, in high good-humour, and more carefully dressed than usual.

It was a brilliant autumn day, with just a tinge of sharpness in the air to make it clear. Elsie's spirits, which had been a little depressed by Euphemia, rose as she sprang into the seat beside her father; and they drove off at a good pace.

'How nice everything looks!' she cried. 'Oh, papa!

you have put up a wire fence—it is a great improvement. And this is a new horse.’

‘New!’ said the Laird. ‘I’ve had him two years.’

‘And I have been away five.’

‘You’re very fine,’ observed the Laird suddenly, looking at his daughter with some complacency, and alluding to the neatly fitting brown suit which she wore.

‘Oh, this is nothing, papa,’ said Elsie gaily. ‘You have no idea what a smart and fashionable person I have become; but I left my best clothes behind for fear they should catch scarlet fever.’

‘Those people were civil to you, I suppose?’ said the Laird, after a pause.

‘Lady Eleanor you mean, and her people? oh, very, *very* kind.’ She became suddenly grave, and was silent for a little, although they were now going slowly up the hill, and there was every facility for conversation. ‘When I go back,’ she was thinking, ‘I shall find a letter from Lady Eleanor to say that Lionel has come back. There might be one by this time; and surely, surely it will come to-day. Why should I feel so happy unless some pleasant thing were coming?’

And now they reached the top of the hill; and there again was St. Ethernans, and the sea, and the blue line of hills that Elsie loved; and she remembered how she had sat and wept on that very spot, thinking she would never see them more.

‘How foolish I was!’ she thought. ‘Never will I believe in presentiments again! Here I am at home, and at peace. And what is to happen to me now?’ was her next thought, but she put it quickly aside. ‘I do not know, nor care. Let me be happy whilst I can—and be at rest.’

CHAPTER X.

‘It is hard in this world not to dread meetings because of partings ;
greetings because of farewells.’

THE Laird had business in St. Ethernans and at Nether Bogie which would detain him some hours ; so he left his daughter at Aunt Grizel’s, promising to return for her. Elizabeth’s well-known face appeared at the door, and she hastened to lead Elsie into the parlour, where Aunt Grizel sat in her old place by the fire. Nothing in the house was altered, except Aunt Grizel herself, but Elsie was saddened at seeing how feeble and fragile looking the old lady had become. She was greatly agitated by the meeting with her niece ; her voice was changed and broken, and she had lost all her former activity, being unable even to rise from her chair without assistance.

Her mind, however, was as vigorous as ever, and it struck Elsie that either increasing infirmities had rendered the old lady more acrimonious, or else she was no longer restrained by her niece’s youth from openly censuring her neighbours. As soon as she had recovered a little from the flutter of excitement into which she was thrown by Elsie’s arrival, she began to reflect upon Lady Eleanor with some bitterness.

‘What was the woman thinking of? has she no sense? To send a girl to nurse a case of scarlet fever—I never heard the like!’

‘She did not send me, Aunt Grizel,’ said Elsie, laughing. ‘She advised me not. I wanted so much to come.’

‘Then what was to hinder you coming before? That

was your Aunt Caroline's doing, I suppose. Here's five years gone by, and she must needs wait till there is scarlet fever in the house before she could let you come.'

'Indeed, Aunt Grizel, she knew nothing about the scarlet fever, so I really don't think that can be laid to her charge. Aunt Caroline has been very good to me,' she added thoughtfully.

'So you never rued the day you went to England?' said Aunt Grizel, looking at her keenly. 'My poor bairn——'

Elsie came and sat on the floor in her old way by Aunt Grizel's chair. 'No,' she said, 'I never rued it—I would not have been without it.' After a pause she went on, 'Aunt Caroline would have let me come home two years ago, but—I did not feel then—as if I could.'

Aunt Grizel laid her hand softly upon Elsie's bent head. 'That was a fine lad, my dear,' she said.

'O Aunt Grizel!' cried the girl suddenly, 'speak to me about him! Nobody speaks about him now; it is as if they had forgotten he ever lived. You saw him that time; tell me everything you can remember. I could not have borne it then, but now—I just weary for the sound of his name.'

Then followed a long conversation, in which Aunt Grizel narrated all she knew of David; his sayings and doings, and the impression he had made upon her. 'He minded me of his father,' she continued, 'in some ways; but he was darker—he'll have got that from the mother's side. I never saw her, you know; she was a beauty, and spoilt—as I've been told; but Archibald Lindsay was a real fine creature.'

'So is Lady Eleanor,' said Elsie eagerly. 'You would like her, Aunt Grizel, if you knew her.'

'Humph!' said Aunt Grizel, who evidently reserved her opinion upon that point.

'Papa never said anything, of course,' said Elsie, 'but—he liked him too, I think.'

'Yes, yes,' said Aunt Grizel; 'there's no doubt Robert took to the young man; it did him good to have a man body in the house. Robert's ill to please sometimes, and

David must have been a good-hearted lad to cheer him up the way he did ; for your father was like another being for the time.'

'I meant to ask you about papa,' said Elsie. 'He's surely not well, Aunt Grizel ; his cheeks never used to have those deep lines in them, and he has lost his colour and grown thin.'

'Ah ! well, it's partly acidity ; and then Robert has a good deal to put up with—he that's always been used to have his own way.'

'He has that still,' said Elsie, looking troubled ; 'at least Euphemia seems to yield to him in everything—a great deal too much, I should have thought.'

'Tuts !' said Aunt Grizel, 'she just puts me beyond patience ! Those soft-headed, obstinate, peaky women are the worst to deal with ; they yield, and then they go and take their own way. She's just wearing Robert—that's your father—to a thread ; and he's never been the same man since you went away.'

'Do you think I ought to stay at home now ? Aunt Grizel, advise me, and I will do whatever you say.'

'There's only one thing I would advise you now, and that is, to go home, and go to your bed,' said Aunt Grizel, looking at her anxiously. 'What in the world's keeping Robert ? You're too white, child, and now—bless me ! you're too red—you're all the colours of the rainbow !'

'I have got a cold,' said Elsie, laughing faintly. 'Don't be anxious, Aunt Grizel ; you know I never take infection.'

'Humph !' said Aunt Grizel ; 'I wish it may be so. Well, here's Robert at last.'

After the Laird came in there was no more talk of this sort, but the conversation turned on farming and the local news, and as soon as tea was over, Miss Grizel hurried them away.

'I shall come and see you on Sunday, Aunt Grizel,' said Elsie, as they rose to take leave.

'If the Lord will, my dear,' said the old lady solemnly ; 'it's not for old people like me to look so far forward, for we know not what a day may bring forth.'

Elsie was subdued and quiet during the drive home ; somehow she began to feel less certain about finding the letter ; and she was becoming painfully aware that she was very tired, and that her throat was sore. 'Yes, I have caught a little cold, papa,' she said, 'in answer to a sudden question from her father ; 'but it is nothing. I think I caught it the day I came home, when it rained so hard.'

The Laird said no more, but touched his horse with the whip and drove home very fast. When they reached the door, he lifted his daughter carefully down, and desired her, in a severe tone, to go at once to her bed and to put a worsted stocking round her throat. Before going to her room, Elsie stopped to look into the nursery. Euphemia came to the door as she opened it. 'Allan's sleeping,' she said in a whisper ; 'he's coming on nicely. Could you come to Peter, he's been asking for you.'

'I will,' said Elsie rather wearily, 'but I must change my dress first. Are there any letters for me, Euphemia?'

'There's one sure enough ; it'll be from the Drumsheugh people, for it's got a coronet and initials ; I couldn't just make them out, but there was an I or a JY, and——'

'Well, I'll come back presently ;' and Elsie went in search of her letter.

Euphemia was right ; it was merely a note of kind inquiries from Lady Ochil, who durst not, for her children's sake, come to see Elsie in person. Elsie put it down, sick with disappointment. She sat down on a low chair beside the bed, and laid her weary head upon the pillow. Half an hour later, Marjorie, coming in, found her in the same position, and, much alarmed, put her to bed without loss of time. Elsie scarcely spoke ; she was faint and trembling, but when questioned, admitted that her throat was very sore.

All that night Marjorie watched beside Elsie's bed. She was undoubtedly attacked by some kind of fever, and became so rapidly and alarmingly worse that very early in the morning a messenger was despatched in haste to St. Ethernans for the doctor. When he came, his verdict was far from reassuring. He was a tall, grave, young man, who

gave his opinion with the air of one whose words carry much weight ; but he was observed by those who knew him well to abstain as much as possible from giving any opinion whatever upon any subject. He felt the patient's pulse, and took her temperature ; he fixed his solemn gaze upon her, first at one side, then at the other, then from the foot of the bed, and his face grew longer at each movement. In answer to Euphemia's eager questions as to whether this was another case of scarlet fever, he only replied in a deep voice, 'There is grrate cause for aaprehension here.'

In solemn silence he wrote a prescription, then gave a few directions to Marjorie respecting the treatment of the patient ; and intimated that he would call again next day.

'Would you just step into the nursery while you're here, doctor ?' said Euphemia.

The doctor complied, and calmly surveyed the two little convalescents, but without uttering a word.

'What do you think, doctor ?' asked Euphemia, fluttered and frightened. 'Do you think Allan not so well ? He was a wee bit fractious, but——'

'Here,' replied the doctor, 'is no longer any cause for aanxietee.'

The oracle then departed, leaving Euphemia much impressed by his wisdom and medical skill, which consoled her a little under the new trouble of Elsie's illness.

'She is in the very best hands at any rate,' thought she.

Marjorie, however, did not share Euphemia's cheerful view of the matter.

'I dinna ken what is wrang,' she said, 'but this is no the way Allan took it ; an' she'll need a heap o' care or she win roond. I'll no leave her to the likes o' you,' she muttered under her breath.

The Laird, restless with anxiety, made frequent visits to his daughter's room to ask her how she did, and to suggest remedies ; but Elsie took little notice, and scarcely seemed to know any one. Sometimes she would start up and ask eagerly, 'Has Lionel come back ?' then, recognising Marjorie or Euphemia, would beg them to see whether there

was a letter for her. She would always try to smile in answer to their soothing words, and lie still for a little while ; then the restlessness would return, and the same question be repeated.

The Laird began once more to turn his thoughts unwillingly towards getting a trained nurse ; but Marjorie, who had never left Elsie from the first, and was jealous of any one taking her place, remonstrated, and proposed instead to send for a certain Mrs. Dewar from St. Ethernans, who was Marjorie's cousin, and 'a rael purposedlike woman,' and who could cook and superintend the housekeeping. That evening, therefore, found Mrs. Dewar installed, and Marjorie was left free to devote herself to her charge. Poor Euphemia, thus deprived of female companionship, was now thoroughly miserable, and it was well that her children took up so much of her time and thoughts. She would waylay her husband, and try to keep him with her, but, though he was not without a certain consideration for her, she entirely failed to obtain from him either conversation or sympathy, while Marjorie sternly, and without the least ceremony, kept her out of her stepdaughter's room.

There was no improvement in Elsie's condition the following day ; and on the next, which was Saturday, the restlessness had given place to stupor, and she lay apparently unconscious.

CHAPTER XI.

*' Notre repentir n'est pas tant un regret du mal que nous avons fait,
qu'une crainte de celui qui nous en peut arriver.'*

WHILST these events were taking place at Rossie, Lady Eleanor was still waiting at Ardvoira for news of her son, and nearly a week had passed since she sent the telegram.

For the last few days Lady Eleanor had been irritable and uneasy. On reviewing the circumstances she did not seriously think that Lionel had gone to Australia; yet she was anxious about him, and impatiently longed for an answer to her message. On the other hand, she was dissatisfied with herself for having let Elsie go. She felt that it was not right, and it hurt her pride to make excuses for herself. If there was anything in the world that Lady Eleanor could not bear, it was being found fault with; even the reproaches of her own conscience were resented by her, but do what she would she could not get rid of the accusing voice.

On the Saturday after Elsie's departure Lady Eleanor received a letter from Lionel, written from the house of an acquaintance in Yorkshire, the brother of his New Zealand friend. He wrote that business prevented his immediate return in answer to her summons, but that he did not see why his presence should be so urgently needed at Ardvoira. Why had Elsie been summoned to Rossie so suddenly? He expected a letter from his mother with distinct explanations, and enclosed his full address. He concluded by saying that he would come back at once if she really needed him, and at all events she might rely on his appearing at

Ardvoira in time to accompany her south. It was characteristic of Lionel to add as a postscript: 'I hope you have not been disturbing yourself about me all this time. I wrote to you the day I left, on board the steamer, but forgot to post it. Have just found the letter in my greatcoat pocket!'

Lady Eleanor was alone in the house that afternoon, all the rest of the party having gone off on a boating expedition; and she was seated at her writing-table, pondering over her answer to her son's letter, when a visitor was announced, and Mrs. Carmichael entered, looking somewhat disturbed in mind.

'Have you heard from Elsie since she left?' she inquired after the first words had passed.

'I had a note to tell of her arrival,' said Lady Eleanor indifferently. 'The child was better, I think she said.'

'I have just had a letter from my daughter Isabella,' said Mrs. Carmichael. 'Elsie is very ill.'

'What?' Lady Eleanor dropped the letter she held, and looked full at her visitor. 'You don't mean she has taken the fever?'

'My dear, I fear it is so. It is a great pity she went, never having had it, and I don't like the account.'

'And I let her go!' cried Lady Eleanor, rising and beginning to walk about the room. 'You are come to reproach me, I suppose—well, so will Lionel! You will all say it is my doing! and how could I help it? she would go.'

'Mrs. Carmichael sat quietly and watched her. 'It was a pity,' she said again.

'Is she very ill?' demanded Lady Eleanor, stopping her walk. 'What does your daughter say?'

Mrs. Carmichael took a letter from her pocket, put on her spectacles deliberately, and read:—

'I met Dr. Robertson's carriage in St. Ethernans, and stopped him to ask for the Rossie children. They are better; but I was truly grieved to hear that dear Elsie has taken the fever. You know one can never get much out of Dr. Robertson, but he said there was considerable cause

for apprehension. There seems to be no eruption, but sore throat and much fever. I wish they would get her a nurse, and better medical advice. We will send to inquire for her to-morrow, and will let you know the report.'

'You see,' said Mrs. Carmichael, folding up the letter, 'it is evident the girl is seriously ill. I wish I saw her father—I would give him a piece of my mind! It is a mad-like thing not to get a nurse, and I know what these St. Ethernans doctors are; this one is just a young ass, and the old one is quite dolted. It is a bad business altogether.'

'But she will get better? People generally recover from scarlet fever,' cried Lady Eleanor in great agitation. 'David and Lionel both had it—I have had it myself—it is not so very serious. Mrs. Carmichael, you don't think she is in danger?'

'I cannot tell,' said Mrs. Carmichael, 'but I don't like the account. However, I will let you know what I hear on Monday'—and she made a movement as if to rise.

'Stay,' said Lady Eleanor, 'do not go yet; let me think what can be done.'

'There is nothing you can do, except wait.'

'Tell me the truth!' cried Lady Eleanor; 'keep nothing from me—you don't think she will *die*? She cannot, it is impossible!'

Mrs. Carmichael laid a hand upon her arm. 'My dear, she is in God's hands.'

Then Lady Eleanor broke into sobs and tears. 'I see you think it. She will die—I know she will! and if she dies I shall never forgive myself! It was my doing—it was for Lionel. Oh! how could I let her go?'

Mrs. Carmichael stood astonished, and even a little shocked at this outburst of distress; she was accustomed to reserve, and could not understand or sympathise with such an open display of feeling.

'Hush, hush!' she said; 'don't put yourself into a state. We must not give up hope, you know; that would be quite wrong, and there is no reason for it.'

'I knew something was going to happen!' said Lady

Eleanor. 'All last night I dreamt of David, and his face reproached me. Am I to lose Lionel and Elsie too? Oh, surely it was a little thing I did to be so punished!'

'I do not understand,' said Mrs. Carmichael. 'My dear, tell me the whole story if it will ease your mind; but for any sake try to quiet yourself.'

Lady Eleanor turned abruptly to the window, as if not quite knowing whether to be offended or not, but the impulse to relieve her mind by speech overcame her; she turned round again with a hasty movement, and in doing so overset a vase of flowers which stood on the table. The water ran over upon the cloth, and trickled down upon the floor; for the moment it arrested her attention, and she stood silently looking from it to Mrs. Carmichael with eyes which saw without comprehending. Her visitor replaced the vase.

'About Lionel, you were saying,' she said cheerfully, beginning to wipe up the water with her pocket-handkerchief.

This action recalled Lady Eleanor to herself. 'Never mind that!' she said with irritation. 'Lionel asked Elsie to marry him, as I daresay you have guessed.'

Mrs. Carmichael nodded. 'Yes, yes, I thought as much.'

'And she refused him. I don't know why,' she went on rapidly, 'I always thought—but no matter. I was out at the time. Lionel went away post haste, without so much as saying good-bye to his mother or any one; and Elsie shut herself up in her room, and said nothing to me—to be sure she didn't know he was gone. When I went to her in the evening to find out, and asked her where he was, she looked perfectly terrified, and said she didn't know. Then, of course, I found out she had refused him.'

'I am sorry to hear she refused Lionel,' said Mrs. Carmichael in her calm voice. 'Do you think she knew her own mind?'

'Oh! I am sure I don't know. She must have driven him to despair, poor boy, for he was perfectly wrapped up in her. She was frightened, as I said, when she heard he

was gone ; and I—I thought he would never come back, and I——’

‘You fell foul of her, I suppose?’ suggested Mrs. Carmichael.

‘Elsie had had a letter from her stepmother, wanting her to come home and nurse that child ; and she persuaded me to telegraph to Lionel that she was gone—she said that would bring him back. She was very urgent with me, and—well, I consented, and this is the end of it. She was off early the next morning.’

Mrs. Carmichael kept silence for a few moments, and Lady Eleanor still stood by the table, mechanically arranging the ornaments upon it. ‘Of course you think I was very much to blame?’ she said.

‘My dear, it is not for me to judge my neighbour,’ answered Mrs. Carmichael gravely. ‘We may all fall into mistakes, but we must just bear the consequences. I trust dear Elsie may get better yet ; we have no reason to think the contrary. I confess I didn’t make the best of it to you, for I was a kind of vexed with you, and my mind misgave me for the poor motherless lassie. But there is no use crying over spilt milk.’

Lady Eleanor’s thoughts had begun to wander during the latter part of this speech.

‘How soon will the next report come?’ she asked abruptly.

‘On Monday, I suppose ; to-morrow is Sunday. No ! stop a minute—I will drive to Portarnish to the English Church, and call at the post-office for the letters. If you come or send to Glen Torran in the afternoon, you will get the news. Now I must go.’

Lady Eleanor was uncommunicative to her own party regarding Elsie’s illness, and cut their questionings rather short. In her own mind she was planning what to do in case no better accounts reached her from Glen Torran. Elsie should not and must not die, she said to herself. Such a thing was impossible, unheard-of ; she would prevent it. Mrs. Carmichael’s words about the insufficient medical attendance, which she had scarcely heeded at the

time, recurred to her ; and she made up her mind that she would herself start for Rossie the first moment she could—early on Monday morning. Lionel should not have it in his power to reproach her for what she had done ; she would snatch Elsie from the very jaws of death ; she would see Captain Ross and insist on procuring the very best medical advice and assistance. In the meantime she spoke of this scheme to no one, not even to her husband, but passed a sleepless night, revolving plans in her mind, and building castles in the air, in which she saw Elsie restored to health by her means, and happily married to Lionel. The morning brought a corresponding weight of anxiety and depression ; Lady Eleanor rose with a headache, and found herself quite unfit to go to church that day. Blanche, who was eager to obtain news of Elsie's condition, begged to be the one to go Glen Torran, to which her aunt consented, charging her to bring back all particulars as speedily as possible. She had not very long to wait ; for Mrs. Carmichael had made no attempt to detain Blanche, and the girl, alarmed at what she had heard, was in haste to upbraid her aunt with what she thought her indifference.

'Aunt Eleanor,' she said, entering hastily, 'the accounts are no better, and I am sure Mrs. Carmichael thinks Elsie dangerously ill. You never told us she was very ill at all.'

'I did !' said Lady Eleanor ; 'if you don't choose to listen, I can't help it. What did she tell you to-day ?'

'Only that she is no better, and they are very anxious about her. That was all Lady Ochil could hear. Aunt Eleanor, you don't seem to care !' continued the excited girl. 'It is *dreadful* that we should know no more than that. I want to go and nurse her, she must not be left——'

'She is not going to be left,' interrupted Lady Eleanor. 'Don't be so foolish, Blanche ; I am going to Rossie myself, and will see that she is properly attended to.'

'You, Aunt Eleanor !' exclaimed Blanche in great astonishment. 'I thought you didn't like nursing—it would be much better for me to go. What does Uncle Frederick say ?'

'I have made up my mind,' said Lady Eleanor; 'and I shall start to-morrow morning by the first steamer. Don't go talking about it, Blanche; nobody knows yet;—but I am certain they don't give that girl proper medicines and things, else she would never have been so ill.'

'I daresay not,' said Blanche, with her air of superior knowledge. 'Country doctors seldom understand the treatment of infectious complaints. I think you are right to go, Aunt Eleanor; still——'

'I shall leave everything in your charge, Blanche. You have some sense if you choose to use it—Constance has none. Now mind you say nothing about it this evening.'

Mr. Fitzgerald was thrown into great consternation by his wife's sudden, and to him incomprehensible design. He at first tried to dissuade her by every possible argument, and finding this utterly useless, he consoled himself by looking out her trains in *Bradshaw*, and trying to prove that she could not reach Rossie under three days at the shortest. No sooner was this theory demolished than he received a fresh shock by finding that she proposed to go alone and unattended even by her maid; but he insisted on sending his own servant, Pritchard, to see her safe to her journey's end.

CHAPTER XII.

'I thought, thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,
And not have strew'd thy grave.'

THE next morning Lady Eleanor set off, on board the same steamer by which Elsie had left Ardvoir, exactly a week before. Unlike Elsie, she got on board with little delay or trouble, but, owing to a stoppage of two hours at an intermediate port for the purpose of taking in sheep, the steamer arrived at Oban so late that Lady Eleanor missed her train. There was a later one, however, which was available, and, escorted by Pritchard, she succeeded, by six in the evening, in reaching Lauriston, a town a few miles from Crossbriggs Junction. Here, after hiring a carriage, she dismissed Pritchard, resolving to post the rest of the way; and, urging the driver to use what speed he could, she started alone upon her twenty-eight miles' drive.

Delays, however, were unavoidable; and the night had long since fallen when her carriage rolled up the Rossie avenue, and a sudden loud peal at the bell startled the watchers within the silent house. The children were asleep; Euphemia had quitted the nursery; fearful of disturbing her husband, and yet craving for companionship, she had gone to Marjorie's room, and the two were sitting over the fire, talking in subdued voices, Euphemia sobbing.

'Eh! Marjorie, this is an eerie house,' she was saying; 'you hear the queerest noises whiles. Last night I—gude sake, what's that?' as a second peal at the bell made both women start from their seats.

'It's the front door,' said Marjorie; 'it maun hae been

the bell we heard afore. What's come o' the lassie that she disna gang till't?' and, taking a light, Marjorie hastened towards the kitchen. In the passage she met the Laird coming out of his room; he looked worn and haggard.

'Are none of you going to answer the bell?' he said. 'Can't you hear there is somebody at the door?'

'Yes sir,' said Marjorie softly, and put her head into the kitchen, while her master retreated again into his room. 'Jessie!' she called in a loud whisper—'Jess! div yc no hear the bell? gang to the door, like a woman, for the Captain's rael ill pleased.'

'I dinna like,' said Jessie, cowering and drawing nearer to Mrs. Dewar for protection.

'Tuts!' and without another word Marjorie turned her back upon the frightened girl and went to the door herself. As she opened it, a tall lady in a long fur cloak came straight up the steps and into the house, as one who had a right to enter there. Marjorie moved a little aside instinctively and said nothing, but held up her light to gaze with great wonder and fear in the face of the stranger. She had never seen her before, this dark-haired, beautiful, imperious woman; what right could she have there?

Lady Eleanor looked beyond Marjorie into the dark hall, as if expecting something, then turned and spoke to her.

'How is Miss Ross?'

The candle Marjorie held wavered and flickered in her trembling hand, and for the moment no answer came.

'This is Captain Ross's house, is it not?' said Lady Eleanor, wondering at the look of fear and perplexity in the woman's face. 'Will you take my card to your mistress?'

'Yes, ma'am,' said Marjorie under her breath, recovering herself now that she saw she was speaking to a real lady of flesh and blood; 'but Captain Ross is in great trouble this night, and—but will you please to step in?'

She led Lady Eleanor into the drawing-room, where a dying fire still flickered; stirred the coals into a blaze, and left her. For a moment Marjorie stopped outside her master's door, fingering the card doubtfully, and half hoping

he would come out and question her ; but as there was no movement within, she was afraid to intrude, and took it to Mrs. Ross as she had been desired. She found her mistress in the nursery, sitting by little Allan's crib, and made a sign to her to come out ; for poor Euphemia was treated with very little ceremony by her servants, and was herself inclined to believe to them as to equals.

Euphemia therefore rose with alacrity, and hastened into the passage, burning with curiosity.

'It's a strange leddy has come,' said Marjorie, 'and' — in an awestruck whisper — 'she's speirin' for Miss Elsie.'

'And—and you told her?'

'No me !' said Marjorie. 'Here her caird—she bid me bring it to you. You'll need to gang till her, mem.'

'Lady Eleanor Fitzgerald,' read Euphemia. 'Preserve us all ! Oh, mercy me, Marjorie ! what'll we do ? I'd ye think she's come to stay ?'

'Leddy Ailnor Fitzjairald,' repeated Marjorie. 'Aweel, mem, I dinna think she'll gang awa' the nicht. Will I mak' ready the best bedroom ?'

'Stop, Marjorie ! dinna go away,' cried Euphemia piteously. 'Oh, I don't think I can speak to her. What like is she?'

'She's a very grand leddy,' replied Marjorie. 'But gang you to the drawing-room, mem ; it's doubtless your pairt to speak till her. Or speak to the Captain ; I'se warrant *he'll* no be feared.'

'Oh, woman, come with me ! I daren't walk the stairs alone.'

Marjorie followed in silence, with a certain contemptuous dignity, and they again paused before the door of the Laird's room. Euphemia knocked timidly, but no answer came. 'No, no !' she breathed out, arresting Marjorie's hand, which was raised to knock again—'he'll be angered—he heard well enough ; I would rather face the lady.'

At the drawing-room door Marjorie stopped. 'Will it be your pleasure that I bide here, mem ?' she inquired stiffly. Euphemia gave her a deprecating look.

'I'll not be long,' she stammered, fumbling at the door, which was suddenly thrown open from the inside, and she found herself face to face with Lady Eleanor.

'Mrs. Ross? I am extremely sorry to inconvenience you, but I was very anxious about our dear Elsie, and I came—I trust she is not worse?'

'Oh, my lady! oh dear, dear, wailed Euphemia, beginning to sob. Oh! what will I do?'

'She is not—dead?' said Lady Eleanor fiercely, making a step forward; then catching sight of Marjorie—'What are you all afraid of? why do you look at me so? what do you mean? Take me to her room at once; she will not die—she cannot be——'

'My leddy,' said Marjorie firmly, stepping forward, 'Gin ye be come to see Miss Elsie in life, ye're come ower late. She died at six o' the clock yestere'en.'

Lady Eleanor was silent for a moment, stunned; then threw up her clasped hands with a wild gesture. 'Great God!' she said—and turned upon poor helpless Euphemia as if she would have slain her. 'Why did you not tell me, woman, that she was dying?' she cried, stamping her foot. 'Why did you not write—telegraph? I would have saved her—I came for that; and you—you have been with her and let her die before your eyes!'

Euphemia cowered and wrung her hands, her sobs becoming almost hysterical.

'Whisht!' said Marjorie, 'for the Lord's sake whisht! ye'll waken the bairns. My leddy, Mrs. Ross is—is overcome, as you see, and the Captain maunna be disturbed.' She took Euphemia by the arm and drew her away. The Laird was standing in his doorway as they passed. 'Make less noise,' he said gruffly; and was about to retreat again when Marjorie stopped him.

'If you please, sir, Leddy Ailnor Fitzjairald is come, and she'll be seeking to see you.'

'Come! where?'

'In the drawing-room, sir. She thought to see—she was not aware, sir, of the trouble.'

The Laird put his hand to his forehead.

'I cannot see her,' he said. 'Tell her so. Give her what she wants. What's the matter with *you*?'—turning to his wife—'that you can't attend to people?' Then, as Euphemia answered only by a still louder sob, he turned away with a weary impatient groan.

'Put your mistress to bed,' he said to Marjorie. 'Why do you let her overdo herself?'—He went back into his room and shut the door, then, as if by an afterthought, he put out his head again. 'See that you give that—that lady a civil message'—he paused, as if racking his brain to find one. 'Give her my compliments. If she will do me the favour to stay I will see her to-morrow.'

Marjorie had a hard task before her. Having attended to Euphemia, and provided for Lady Eleanor's accommodation, she returned to give the latter the Laird's message, and to conduct her to her room. Lady Eleanor was walking up and down the room, with clenched hands, in angry impatient grief; no longer the stately dignified lady Marjorie had met at the door, but a wild, passionate woman, with sharp, haggard face and disordered dress. Marjorie scarcely knew how to address her.

'If you please, my leddy,' she said, and stopped. No notice was taken, and she began again louder. 'The Captain, my leddy——'

Lady Eleanor ceased her fierce walk up and down, and made an impatient sign to her to go on.

'The Captain, my leddy,' said Marjorie, considerably embarrassed, looking down and plaiting her apron into little folds as she spoke, 'takes it very kind your being here, and his compliments, and he will hope to see you to-morrow. Your leddyship's room is ready,' she concluded, taking up the candle, and holding the door open for her to pass out.

Lady Eleanor went to the room prepared for her without a word; and Marjorie, having lighted her candles, said, 'The tea will be ready shortly. Will I bring it up? or will your leddyship please to come down?'

'I want nothing,' said Lady Eleanor harshly; 'you can go. Please to leave me alone.'

Marjorie retired, and took counsel with herself as to what should be her next step. 'My certie, she's a proud leddy yon; I'se warrant few would say nay to her. But to think as she could keep the puir lamb in life when it was the Lord's will that she suld dee. Eh! it's an awfu' like pride yon. But for guidin' hersel' she's nae better nor a bairn. She maunna gang fastin' till her bed; I'll tak' her up her drap tea.'

It was with no little trepidation that Marjorie again ventured to the best bedroom door with her tray; but she was sustained by a sense of her own importance as well as of duty, and felt it necessary for the credit of the house that no visitor should be allowed to go 'fasting to her bed.'

Having knocked several times without receiving any answer, she took courage and went in. Lady Eleanor had flung herself upon the sofa with her head buried in the cushions, and, overcome by fatigue and grief, wept and moaned like a child, without restraint. Marjorie waited till she was quieter, then spoke to her soothingly, and tried to raise the cushion under her head. Lady Eleanor made no resistance; she seemed to have no strength left to be angry or offended; she drank the cup of tea which was held to her lips, but pushed away all other food, and Marjorie did not press it upon her.

After a while Marjorie offered to help her to undress, but Lady Eleanor, still weeping violently, shook her head. 'Was it you,' she said presently, 'who told me she was dead?'

'It's ower true,' said Marjorie sadly; 'but oh! my leddy, dinna greet that way. It's the Lord's will. He kens best.'

'Best!' cried Lady Eleanor. 'How dare you say so? Why should she die? she was young and strong. It is monstrous, it is cruel. Why do you stand there? are you made of stone? have you no feeling? But you do not care, I suppose—why should you?'

'Me? I daurna greet!' replied Marjorie, with a tremble in her voice that was half anger. 'Should na the Lord

tak' hame His ain? I've held her in these arms—she's been like a bairn to me—and there'll be mony a sair heart for her sake forbye yours and mine. But it's no when she's lying deid ben the house'—here the tears triekled down Marjorie's cheeks—'that sic words should be spoken. And if you saw her—would ye come and look on her, my leddy?'

Lady Eleanor turned away shuddering, but suddenly seemed to change her mind. 'I will eome,' she said.

It would be difficult to define her motive in thus acting; for she had a natural shrinking from death, and everything connected with it, and in a calmer moment would have done anything rather than face such a sight. Perhaps in the morbid state of her feelings she wished to spare herself no additional pang; perhaps she had some undefined lingering hope that Elsie might not be really dead after all. She might have fallen into some long faint or trance, such things were not quite unheard of. There might be a possibility of her reviving; or were it not so, surely the released spirit could not be so far on its way (even this wild thought crossed Lady Eleanor's mind) that it would not come back at her bidding—at her entreaty.

It was with a strange feeling, as of one who walks in a dream, that she followed Marjorie up the steps and along the narrow passage to the turret room where the dead girl lay.

As she went along Marjorie muttered a sort of apology for her arrangements, lest her reverence for the dead might seem to savour of superstition. 'Its the White room,' she said, 'an' its a far way off—an' I just left a pair of wax candles burnin'—an' the Drumsheugh folk they sent white flowers. Its a fulishness, but its their gude will, nae doot. And she aye liket flowers, dear lamb.'

The room was dimly lighted by the candles Marjorie had placed there; and between the white curtains lay the form of Elsie, still and beautiful, with Eucharis lilies laid beside her on the bed.

Marjorie had judged rightly. When Lady Eleanor left that calm presenee, all violent agitation was subdued; she

became reasonable and quiet, and suffered herself to be undressed and put to bed.

She understood now ; dimly and painfully she comprehended. That white rigid form was not Elsie ; the spirit which used to animate it was gone where no weak earthly cry could reach it ; and she felt as she stood there that even if the words were put into her mouth which had power to call Elsie back to life, she would not dare to speak them.

CHAPTER XIII.

'And you shall deal the funeral dole ;
Ay, deal it, mother mine,
To weary body, and to heavy soul,
The white bread and the wine. . . .
But deal not vengeance for the deed,
And deal not for the crime ;
The body to its place, and the soul to Heaven's grace,
And the rest in God's own time.'

THE promised interview with the Laird did not take place next day. Lady Eleanor was too unwell to leave her room, and it was only towards evening that she was able to get up and sit by the fire, wrapped in her dressing-gown. Euphemia, after her night's rest, had forgotten most of her tremors, and was even disposed rather to plume herself upon the fact that she entertained a lady of title under her roof. She was officious in her offers of assistance, and, with a little encouragement, would have been glad to pour out to her guest the whole painful history of the last week, down to its minutest detail. But Lady Eleanor would none of her.

'You are very kind,' she said, closing her eyes languidly, 'but I would rather you did not sit with me. I really need nothing.'

'I am sure,' said Euphemia, twisting her hands, 'your ladyship is very easily pleased. I am really happy to see you so composed-like. But is there nothing you could take? I am sure anything in my power——'

'I should like to see the woman who came to me last night, if you don't mind,' said Lady Eleanor.

Euphemia retired rather crestfallen ; she would so dearly

have liked a little gossip ; and she had got no conversation out of Marjorie, who had been very 'short,' as her mistress phrased it, all day, and anything but respectful, for it must be confessed that Marjorie was considerably uplifted in mind by her success of last night.

She waited upon Lady Eleanor as desired ; and the latter, opening her large dark eyes, regarded her fixedly. 'What is your name?' she said.

'Marjorie Hay, my leddy,' was the reply with a curtsy ; for there was something in this lady's manner which compelled from Marjorie the respect which she denied to Euphemia.

'Sit down there,' said Lady Eleanor, indicating a chair opposite to her ; 'I wish to speak to you. You were—Miss Ross's nurse, you said.'

'I was, my leddy.' And, encouraged by Lady Eleanor's questions and evident interest, she went on to tell her of many things—of Elsie's childhood, and the old days before she left Rossie ; of the blank her absence had made, and how her father had grown old and worn before his time. How he had cheered up at her return that wet and stormy day the week before ; how sweetly she had attended to him and nursed the children until the fever struck her down ; and of the last few days of suffering. Of these there was little to tell ; the poor child had been mostly wandering, and had not been able to speak much ; but Lady Eleanor heard with tears of her constant questions about Lionel, and her anxiety that he should come home.

'But after that day,' said Marjorie, 'she was real quiet ; and when she couldna speak she aye smiled. I kent from the first how it would be,' she went on, lowering her voice. 'I had had a warnin'.'

Lady Eleanor looked inquiring.

'The day she turned ill, she gaed awa' to St. Ethernans wi' the Laird, an' they were gey late of comin' hame. I was lookin' for them, an' I thocht to take a breath of caller air at the door. The sun was goin' down in a bonny sky, an' I saw a white doo——'

'A white doo?'

'That's a dauve,' explained Marjorie, 'jist a white dauve, an' it cam' oot o' the wast straight afore my een, an' flew in at the White room window—ye never saw the like—an' I gaed in, an' I seekit every pairt—an' there was nae doo! It was a warnin'. D'ye believe in thae things?'

'I don't know,' said Lady Eleanor, startled at the pointed question; 'you should ask a clergyman. But what happened next?'

'As I was sayin', resumed Marjorie, 'Miss Elsie never held up her head sin' that nicht, an' it was on the Sabbath at the same hour that she died. Ye ken the White room window is to the west—an' the sun it was near down, an' the sky was red, red wi' a bonny licht—an' she gar'd me turn her wi' her face to the west. I thocht she was a wee thing better, an' I went to draw up a bit o' the blind, an' stude there a minute; an' when I turned again—I took a thocht to send for the Laird. An' she was gone before he came.'

Marjorie said no more, but sat looking before her musing, while Lady Eleanor leaned back in her arm-chair with her eyes closed. She looked very pale and sad; her thick dark hair hung loose about her shoulders; her white hands lay listlessly upon her lap. She had lost much of the imperious manner which had awed Marjorie at first; yet the latter, as she looked at her, was struck afresh by her uncommon and refined beauty. After a little while Marjorie rose.

'Will your leddyship be needing onything further?' she inquired with deep respect.

'No, nothing, thank you. Stay a moment. When is the-- the funeral?'

'On Thursday, my leddy, at one o'clock.'

It was a still October day when Elsie was laid to rest by her mother's side in the churchyard of St. Ethernans. Lady Eleanor had fully made up her mind to attend the funeral, and see the last of her whom she so deeply mourned. During the intervening day she did not leave her room, as she still felt weak and ill, and was anxious to keep all her strength for this effort. She knew it was not the usual custom in Scotland for women to attend funerals,

but for this she did not care in the least. No argument of Euphemia or Marjorie had the least effect in deterring her ; but she was finally induced to give up her purpose by a somewhat peremptory message from the Laird, who intimated that on his return he would be glad to see her, but in the meantime he would be much obliged if she would stay at home.

As the afternoon drew on, she could no longer bear the solitude of her own room, but came down to the dreary drawing-room, and sat there with Euphemia, silent and abstracted. The Laird's refusal to let her accompany him made Lady Eleanor very unhappy, not that the sight of the grave would have been anything but most painful to her, but because she was morbidly desirous of inflicting penance upon herself, by way of atoning in some sort for her carelessness of Elsie while she lived. At first her impulse had been to confess it all to Captain Ross, and so, if possible, ease her conscience of its burden ; but how could she meet the bereaved father, returning from his child's new-made grave, and tell him that, but for her selfish negligence, that daughter might yet have been alive and well ? She looked across at Euphemia, who sat opposite to her, black-robed and tearful, yet complacent, her mind still running upon the dismal hospitalities of the occasion.

But Lady Eleanor had little insight into character, and in her softened and repentant state she pitied Euphemia. Presently a carriage drove up the avenue.

'There's the Captain come back, poor man,' said his wife with a sigh ; 'he'll like to see you, my lady. Not that he's in any hurry,' she added with anxious politeness, 'just whenever it suits your ladyship's convenience. Shall I tell him you are ready ?'

'Stay, Mrs. Ross,' said Lady Eleanor, rousing herself to prevent Euphemia leaving the room. 'I had something to say to you.'

Euphemia sat down again immediately, but her guest did not speak for some minutes.

'I was very rude to you the night I came,' she said at last abruptly.

'Oh no! my lady, I'm sure I never thought——' said Euphemia in great embarrassment.

'But I was very rude,' repeated Lady Eleanor sharply. 'Why do I say rude? I was brutal. Do you know why?'—she rose excitedly and stood before Euphemia's chair. 'You told me Elsie was dead, and it was my fault.'

Euphemia, terrified and uncomprehending, burst into a flood of tears. 'Oh! my lady, I know,' she sobbed out, 'I know it was all my blame her coming here; but Allan was so ill, and I was *that* put about—and oh! I never thought to have it cast up to me again. The Captain, poor man, *he* never said a word; for when she turned so ill I couldn't hold my tongue, and I up and *told* him it was my blame, and he never raged nor nothing.'

Lady Eleanor looked at her perfectly astonished.

'Are you in your senses?' she said. 'I cannot think what you mean. I tell you it was my fault—I let Elsie come here when I knew there was infection.'

'Your fault! oh, my lady, it was *me*!—I wrote to her to come.'

'So you did!' said Lady Eleanor, remembering this for the first time. She paused a moment, while it slowly dawned upon her that this other mother had also sacrificed Elsie for her own child's sake. 'We have both been to blame,' she said gently, taking Euphemia by the hand. 'Do not cry so—I never meant to agitate you. We have both cause to be most unhappy.'

Lady Eleanor's sympathy had never before been so fully awakened. Remembering her own agonies of remorseful pain, she judged others by herself, and had no comprehension of Euphemia's duller nature. In her great compassion she took the sobbing woman in her arms. 'Do not cry,' she repeated.

It was perhaps well for Euphemia that she was at this moment summoned to the nursery, whither she retired with a lightened heart, impressed with the idea that all blame was now shifted from her shoulders to Lady Eleanor's.

During her absence the Laird entered. The black clothes which he wore that day altered him strangely; and

even Lady Eleanor, who had never seen him before, was struck by his worn unhappy look. His manner was gruff as usual, yet there was an odd sort of dignity about him as he advanced and greeted her.

‘I’m sorry to hear you’ve been indisposed,’ he said when the first words had passed. ‘You have taken a great deal of trouble coming here.’

‘My coming has proved quite useless, Captain Ross, and I fear inconvenient. Will you forgive my troubling you at such a time? I leave to-morrow.’

The Laird made her a bow. ‘I can’t ask you to stay longer at present,’ said he. ‘Another time—in summer, when the weather is good, I should be glad to see you. Though there is nothing to come for now.’

Lady Eleanor raised her head to frame some answer, but none came, her eyes were full of tears. The Laird too had evidently something to say which he had a difficulty in bringing out.

‘I am obliged to you,’ he said at length, ‘for the regard you have shown to my daughter. She—she was very sensible of it.’

‘She was very dear to me,’ said Lady Eleanor in a broken voice.

At this moment Euphemia entered, and caught the last words. She saw Lady Eleanor standing before the Laird pale and agitated, and looked anxiously from one to the other. Nothing surely, short of his displeasure, could have brought tears to her ladyship’s eyes. The foolish kindly creature felt impelled to interfere on her behalf, for terrified as Euphemia was of her husband, she never could let him alone.

‘Oh! Captain, you’ll surely not be ill at her ladyship, and her so kind as to take the blame on herself. For indeed, until her ladyship came I thought it was me that did all the mis—chief, but you see now that I am not so senseless as you make out.’

‘I don’t understand a word you say,’ said the Laird. He fixed a stony stare upon his wife; then looked inquiringly at Lady Eleanor.

'I had not intended to speak again on this most painful subject,' said the latter rather haughtily, but with her eyes on the ground. 'I left it to Mrs. Ross to tell you—if she wished it—at a better time; but I know too well that your present grief is greatly owing to my carelessness. I might have prevented her coming here. I have been much to blame.'

'There is no blame,' said the Laird sternly. 'I blame nobody. It was all a mistake together,' he added, putting his hand to his forehead with the weary gesture which had lately become habitual to him.

Then he turned upon his wife. 'Go to your children.' He said this with such bitter sharpness that Euphemia started aside as if he had struck her.

'Yes, yes,' she whimpered, 'dinna be put about now—oh Captain, you're so hasty! and me just newly come down!'

'Would you—oblige me—by going to your children?' said the Laird with ironical politeness, holding the door open for her to pass out. When he had shut it after her he came back to Lady Eleanor, who had seated herself, and looked on at this little scene with a slight expression of contempt upon her face.

'My wife—means well,' he said. 'At least, I suppose so. She came to me with some story about a letter she had written—women can't hold their tongues—if she spoke of it to you——'

Lady Eleanor made an affirmative sign.

'I wish it to be understood that *I blame no one.*' The Laird said this with difficulty, as if putting some force upon himself, and choosing his words with great care.

'You are generous, Captain Ross,' said Lady Eleanor.

'While I am upon this subject—which need not be returned to'—he continued with the same laborious formality—'I have some things here which should belong to you.' He opened a desk which he had brought in with him, and placed in Lady Eleanor's hands a case containing David's watch, and the ring which he had given to Elsie. Then, without giving her time to speak, he looked

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